

Phoenix in Ashes

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By

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Prologue

From the Journal of Zacharias Banducci

Fall 2040

This journal is to make sense out of something I don't understand. I always thought that the United States was beyond all the madness in the rest of the world. We had the resources that made us independent, the military that made us invulnerable. Nobody would mess with us. We finally got away from the idea that we were the world's policeman. We took in thousands upon thousands of refugees. Then it happened.

I was in Kansas, looking for work, like thousands of others when the bombers struck. No one ever said how they got the dirty bombs into the country. Nothing like the bombs that we were looking for from the Arabs or Russians or Chinese, but suitcase bombs. They waited until the State of the Union and they let them off in a bunch of cities around the world. Why? Something about the Twelfth Imam Movement. Before everything collapsed, I heard that forty bombs were set off in the major cities in the country and around the world.

It took me almost eight months to get back to Atlanta to search for my family. I had to dodge 'hot spots' and 'wild areas' where only locals were welcome. My family and I lived forty miles north of Atlanta, out of the path of the wind-blown radioactive dust. My home was looted and half burned and my family had disappeared. I searched for them over the next year, going from refugee camp to refugee camp. As time went by, I realized that they

were gone and the country was spiraling down to barbarism. Different groups were setting up power bases. Disease and plagues passed in waves and more and more people died. I don't know how many are left, what with the bombs, the radiation deaths, the sickness, the mass suicides and the killings by gang and groups.

I returned to my home and retrieved what weapons and supplies I could. My gun safe was hidden behind a false wall in the basement and was untouched. In it were a Webley, a 12-gauge shotgun and an M1 Carbine. I plan to travel to the RockyMountain area to live. I want to get as far away from Georgia as I can.

Chapter 1

The Meeting

Spring 2041

After four months of travel, I am in Eastern Nebraska. It has been a hard trip. I have had to dodge murdering reavers, local militias, 'hot spots', all the while searching for food and supplies. I picked up a Knights SR-35 sniper rifle, 2025 model, from a reaver who was not too good with it.

I am being followed, I think. A party was behind me on I-80 and, when I turned off, they did, too. I found another side road and they turned off behind me, again. Tomorrow I will see what is going on; I might be able to get them all; there are only four or five of them.

The rain had stopped and the sun appeared, hot, so that the forest steamed. The lean-faced man, dressed in camouflage hunting pants and a green army coat, knelt on the uphill side of the road behind low, dripping bushes. His M1 carbine was sighted to the South on the bend of the narrow country road. He sucked the moisture off the ragged moustache which covered his upper lip and tickled his lower one. His black leather backpack leaned against the pine tree behind him, along with the brown cloth, waterproof rifle bag. A Webley .45 hung from a lanyard around his neck and was tucked into his waistband.

Zach Banducci had a fondness for both guns. The M1 had been brought back from the Pacific Theater after World War II by his great-

grandfather. The Webley was from World War I and had been won from a British officer, who erroneously prided himself on his poker playing, by his great-great-grandfather.

MOVEMENT

No, it was just a rabbit scampering across the road, in a hurry to cross the open space to avoid any handy predators. Zach closed his green eyes and listened for any foreign sounds in the quiet woods. When the birds stilled and the insects stopped their noise, he opened his eyes again.

MOVEMENT

This time his quarry showed himself. Zach decided that his slouch hat might be noticeable and he slowly removed it and carefully placed it on the damp ground next to the pack. Almost at once a drop of water hit his neck and slid down his back.

“Never fails,” the man thought absently. “There is always a drop just waiting for you to take off your hat.” A large boy, coal black, round faced and round bodied, came into view. Clad in worn bib overalls and a non-too clean, white t-shirt, he was carrying a small caliber target rifle and wearing a large pack worn too low. “He’s going to be sore tomorrow,” Zach thought. The boy plodded up the road, shuffling his feet. His eyes were fixed to the ground. Zach curled his thin lips in disgust. Obviously, the boy was unaware of his surroundings and was looking forward to a meal and rest.

Unmoving, Zach stared at the space behind lad, aware that a fixed stare was sometimes felt by the watched. The boy stopped for a minute, taking a breather. A larger version of the boy, dressed identically, appeared around the bend. He, too, was wearing a large pack and had a shotgun slung over his shoulder, the barrel behind the left shoulder and the butt behind his

right hip. He was struggling with a two-wheeled cart with stake sides. The man said something to the woman coming behind him, pushing at the tail of the cart. The woman was as slight as the man was stout. Her dress was thin and worn. It was stained around the neck and armpits with sweat. She gave the man a weary smile and called over her shoulder to a young girl coming along behind, holding the hand of a younger boy. Both had on faded jeans and tennis shoes. The girl wore a baggy sweater, the sleeves of which she continually tugged up her thin arms. The boy was bare-chested and sagged with weariness.

The first boy started again. When he was a little ahead of the bush where Zach was waiting, Zach said quietly in a hard voice, "Hold it right there. Move and you are dead."

The boy froze, and then started to swing up his weapon, only to hesitate and relax. This was always the dangerous point, whether they want to be heroes or smart. The kid decided to be smart. He dropped the rifle and raised his hands.

"Will?" queried the man at the cart, his voice the deep bass that Zach expected from someone his size. "What's wrong, Will?" The man dropped the shafts as Zach stepped out of the bushes and jammed his gun into the boy's gut, grabbing him by the front of his bib overalls as he did.

"Mister," the man at the wagon said, "we don't have much, just enough to get by on, but you can have anything there is, just leave my family alone." The big man started to tug at the sling of his shotgun.

Zach tilted his head to the right and raised his eyebrows; "You wouldn't get that thing into action before I killed the kid and you. Just leave it where it is."

Zach continued, “I don’t want anything you have. I want to know why you been following me.”

“Wait a minute,” came the nervous reply. “We’re not following anybody. We just want to find a safe place and this road is not used much anymore. We don’t even know you, mister.”

The tiny woman had stopped and slewed the wagon so it would not roll downhill. She was clutching the little girl and boy protectively.

“William, what’s the matter?” she asked querulously.

“Nothing, Sandy,” he called back over his shoulder. “You and Janey and Donny just stay there. There’s a fella up here and we’re talking. Stay there.”

“She got a weapon?” Zach asked.

“No, just a kitchen knife in the wagon. Mister, we really weren’t following you. Ya gotta believe me. We’ll head back down the road and go another way. Honest.” The man was getting close to panic and his voice rose from its deep bass to a quavering tenor. “We’ve had all the trouble we can handle and we don’t want any more from you or anybody.”

“Lay your guns against the bushes across the road there and step back.”

“Mister, you know I can’t do that. I can’t leave my family defenseless with you sitting there with a gun on us,” he said in a quiet voice, his hand sneaking up to the sling of his shotgun.

“Hell, I hope you are as harmless as you sound, old son,” Zach replied. “If you or your boy or the woman does something stupid, I will kill you. Understand?”

William looked up, his hand tightening on the shotgun sling. “Mister,

we won't do anything stupid. Just let us go, won't ya?"

Zach stood in the road, looking them over. The family appeared to be typical farmers. William's hands were as massive as he was. Zach estimated the man was six or seven inches over six feet and the boy was close to six feet and had some more growing to do. He hadn't realized their size until he had to look up at them. Zach was five feet eleven and a half; he didn't try to lie about being six feet, though he regretted never attaining that height.

"There's a spot around the next bend, a small cove with a creek running through it and plenty of wood for fuel. I'll meet you there."

Zach edged up the hill to his gear and took an animal path along the contour of the hill, above the road, surprisingly quiet. His feet avoided leaves and sticks almost by instinct. He kept an eye on the party below him as they closed up and began the short tramp to the bend. They hesitated when they came opposite the cove, as if they were silently debating whether to keep going or not. William shook his head and turned into the campsite Zach had indicated. As the woman sat wearily down, William told Will to put his rifle on the wagon and step back, though he kept the shotgun, himself, pointed at the ground. Janey sat in her mother's lap and silently sobbed with weariness and fear. Sandy stroked her hair to soothe her. Donny, wide-eyed, just stood next to his mother.

"Is this going to be a Mexican standoff?" Zach asked casually from the trees on the opposite side of the clearing. "I know I can trust me, but I don't know about you and vice versa. I'm stepping out now. I'm going to lean my gun against the tree, here. One of us will have to trust the other." Zach leaned his M1 against the uphill side of the leafless maple and stepped out on the downhill side, his left hand hidden behind the bole.

William bent and leaned his shotgun against the wagon and stood up, resigned to the situation. “I figure you got a hand-gun in your left hand, but, like you say, someone has got to trust the other. You could have shot us down the road, so I don’t figure that’s what you plan. Am I right?”

Smiling, Zach tucked the Webley back behind his belt. He picked up his carbine and walked into camp. He apologized to Sandy and Janey for worrying them. He asked Will to collect some wood for a fire. Sitting down on a log, he pulled out a combat knife and began shaving a stick he pulled from under a scrap of tarp. William used the shavings and some smaller branches to build a fire. When Will returned with an armful of wood, Zach opened his pack and, after rummaging through it, brought out several cans of chili and a can opener.

“Here’s my contribution to supper, what’s yours?” he asked with a grin. “Hope you like chili.”

Sandy started to get up, but William waved her down. He went to the wagon and pulled out a stained flour sack. “We have some bacon and a half loaf of bread. We were hoping to shoot something, but the rain, well, we didn’t.”

After moving a couple of the firestones, Zach pulled out a small skillet from his pack and set it over the fire. “Not according to the President’s Council on Fitness, but it should keep body and soul together. You got a story to tell, old son?”

William told Zach about how he and his family had had a small farm in the hills of northern Missouri. They had survived the destruction by the dirty bombs and the flu pandemic. The two years of chaos that followed, further decimating the world, had missed them, too. They had started

rebuilding and looking forward to more peaceful times, when roving gangs had begun searching out the few survivors. It seemed the world had descended into further barbarism. The gangs, styling themselves the People of God, were fundamentalist Christians, calling the troubles the punishment of God and insisting that everyone must adhere to the tenets of the Bible, as they perceived them. Anyone refusing was burned to save his or her souls from Hell.

After one visit, William decided that they had to run. They gathered all of the food they could, some clothes, seed and the two guns and headed northwest. They were searching for a place to hide and start again.

“That’s when we met you, mister,” he finished.

“The name’s Zach. Zach Banducci.” Zach replied. “My story isn’t much different. I was working in Kansas when the bombs went off. I headed for Atlanta to get my family. By the time I got there, they had gone or been killed. The evacuation of the Atlanta suburbs was bad, from what I heard and no records were kept or they’ve been lost.”

He continued telling of his decision to head West. His wife had family in Chicago, but he didn’t know if she and his daughter had headed there or to one of the refugee camps, which had become charnel houses from the epidemic. He told them how he had lived by scavenging small towns, ranches and farms along the way.

Indicating the empty cans, he said, “I picked up those from an abandoned farmhouse two days ago. They must really have loved their chili, because I found whole cases of it in the pantry. They had died of the flu or something. They were all in their beds, when I found them. Buried them out back of the farm in a garden. Sad sight, but nothing else I could do.” Zach

sat and stared at the fire for a while, the others hesitant on breaking into his thoughts.

“Time for bed,” he said, finally. “We can go our separate ways, tomorrow.”

“Uh, mister, I mean, Zach, wouldn’t it be better to travel together? We, well, could, would be stronger by joining together. You would have a couple of extra guns and we would have extra guns, too.”

“William, I don’t want to be hard on you, but you are more of a detriment than an asset. Look how easy I took you. Will wasn’t paying any attention, your weapon was slung and you couldn’t get it into action before next Christmas. You got a load of goods, which means we would have to travel on roads. We can head in the same direction for a while, but I’m not saddling myself with you. Sorry, but that’s the way it is.”

With that, he unrolled his blankets and ground sheet, pulled off his hiking boots and, using his pack for a pillow, went to sleep with his Webley in hand.

Chapter 2

Ambush

Spring 2041

Tenderfeet. I'm amazed that they lived as long as they did. We decided to go on together, I like coffee and Sandy makes a fine cup. Tenderfeet. I'll have to get rid of them ASAP or this could be a short and painful trip. All we have to do is stay out of sight and out of trouble. I haven't seen too many people and we avoided those, so it should be fairly easy to do. His cart will come in handy, if we find anything of value.

Zach woke up to the smell of coffee. He headed downstream to make his morning toilet. The Smith's could hear him spluttering as he splashed cold water on his face. Slicking his wet hair back, he returned to camp. Sandy offered him a cup and a plate of fried potatoes and biscuits. Sandy kept filling his cup and adding more food to his tin plate until it dawned on him that this was probably part of a plan to get him satisfied and cooperative. "Good food. Thanks. This doesn't mean that I have changed my mind," he said around a mouthful of biscuit and potatoes. "At the next fork of the road, we split. I wish you the best, but I won't be made the babysitter for your family, William"

"William and I will do what you want, Zach," said Sandy as she picked up the dishes and dropped them into a pan of water that was boiling over the fire. "We'll keep the kids quiet. You won't even know we are around".

Zach looked at her suspiciously, sure that there was something going on, but he couldn't pin it down. He sipped at the coffee and silently watched the family clean up camp and load the cart. They kept giving Zach sidelong glances and Sandy shushed her husband when William started to speak.

With a snort of self-disgust, Zach tossed the dregs of his coffee onto the fire. "I know I am going to regret this but you would get yourselves killed if I let you go it alone. But, you had better be prepared to follow any and all of my orders. Immediately. Will, you will take the rear guard. Stay about a hundred yards behind the wagon. If there is trouble, come up slowly. It wouldn't do to get killed running into a trap.

"William, you have the cart, but, put the shotgun on top of the load where Sandy can get to it if she needs to.

"Janey and Donny. Your job is to get down and stay down, if we have any trouble. I don't want you two getting in the line of fire. Get behind the cart the minute I tell you. Don't ask questions; don't worry about getting your clothes dirty or anything. Just do it.

"All right, we leave in ten minutes. Head downstream to, um, do what you need to do," Zach finished lamely.

Sandy took Janey off to wash up. Donny took the water jugs upstream to fill them, while William and Will finished packing the wagon.

Zach settled his pack on his shoulders. He slipped on his fingerless batting gloves and picked up his carbine, checking the magazine. He patted his pockets, absentmindedly, checking on the location of the other magazines. After he pinched the tip of his nose, a habit he couldn't tell where he picked up, he shrugged the pack more comfortably on his back and set off. William, Sandy, Janey and Donny waited until he had rounded the bend and followed.

Will waited to a count of a hundred and followed them.

That day they followed the road, the way becoming easier when they crossed the crest of the hills. They rested at noon and ate a cold meal. The men and Will took turns as sentinels covering the road in both directions. Sandy and the younger children slept.

Zach joined William at his post and pulled out his detailed map, spreading it on a small boulder. “We are about here,” he says, pointing to a spot on the map. “Once we get to the end of this hilly part, there is a long valley heading to the West. There is, what looks to be, a farm or ranch about a mile and a half down the road. I want to check it out. I figure to leave you and yours at the end of the hills and scout the place.”

William, keeping his eyes on the road, which met with Zach’s unspoken approval, replied, “Zach, I don’t see the point in splitting up. If we wait until night, we can all go together. The moon will be near full and there will be plenty of light to see the road and the buildings or, at least, the road to the place. If there is trouble, we might have the firepower to do some good, if there isn’t trouble, you have saved yourself a round trip.”

Zach pulled a blade of dry grass from a clump at the side of the road and chewed on it while he mulled over William’s words. Finally, he spat out the grass, slapped William on the shoulder and rose. “All right, old son,” was all he said as he moved back to the camp to some sleep before they moved out.

By mid-afternoon the next day, the party had reached the end of the hilly section and was looking across the overgrown fields of what had once been a prosperous farm. William noted that the corn looked to be self-seeded, so it hadn’t been harvested in the previous year. No smoke showed in the

direction where the farm buildings should have been located, if they had survived at all. Over the past few months Zach had seen a lot of burned out buildings, work of reavers who destroyed what they didn't use. As he studied the layout, he pondered the use of the word 'reaver'. He shook his head to rid it of the idle thought. "Probably read it somewhere," he thought.

Zach, never one for waiting around, decided to pull out. There were trees and brush along the road, which would conceal them for most of the distance. They resumed their formation and cautiously started forward. At every bend, Zach raised his hand to signal a halt and he lay down and eased his head out to peer around the corner to see if it was clear. He would stand up and wave them forward when he didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

After two hours of this slow progress, Zach stopped them at the driveway to the farm. When he had checked out the road, he waved them forward, motioning them to keep as low as possible. He signaled Will to go back to the last curve in the road and keep watch.

"There it is," he whispered to William, pointing up the driveway and easing back so William could take a look without sticking his head over the bushes growing along the roadside. William took off his hat, lay down and edged his head around the bushes and fencepost to see a group of buildings in the distance.

When he had moved back, he whispered to Zach, "Should we go up?"

"No, it's almost dark. We'll wait until then to see if we can see a sign of life. I doubt there is anyone there, since there aren't any fresh tracks on the road, but you never can tell.

"Get the cart into those trees across the road and I'll get Will. We can wait there."

Zach forced himself to lie down and he finally fell asleep from the heat, humming of insects, bird noises and weariness. He hadn't had someone to watch while he slept in years and had trained himself to wake several times an hour to listen before drifting off again. Now, however, William and Will stood guard while he enjoyed the first deep sleep in a long while. Years of habit don't die easily and he awakened after two hours, just as the sun was going down. He sat up, stretched, causing joints to pop, and yawned

After taking a drink of water, Zach rummaged through his sniper rifle bag and pulled out a scope. He grinned at the Smiths and said, "Night scope with infrared. Sandy, you and the younger children stay here. We will leave you the shotgun, but be careful. I don't want to get hit with friendly fire.

"William, take this," he said handing the farmer his M-1. "Will get your gun. We will go up the road with me in the lead, William, you count to twenty and follow and, Will, you do the same when your father starts. I don't want us to clump up."

Zach stopped frequently to study the layout of the buildings, but didn't see any sign of life. When they reached the house, Zach stole quietly up the front steps and tried the front door. He looked at William and shook his head to indicate that it is locked. Zach moved along the porch, looking in windows with the scope, while William, being tall, looked in windows along the west side of the house. Will circled around to the east.

Suddenly, the front door opened and Zach swung his carbine up and crouched on the porch. As he was about to pull the trigger, he recognized a grinning Will step out of the house saying, "There was a window open." Zach blew out his breath and said, "That's how friendly fire happens, Will," and jabbed the chagrined boy lightly in the stomach as he entered the house.

Zach halted in the hall and listened for any sound, but didn't hear anything. When William joined them, after his inspection of the house and discovery of the open window, which he knew he wouldn't be able to climb through, the three entered the hall. Directly ahead of them were the stairs to the upper floors, alongside of which ran a hall to the back of the house. Doors to the right and left were closed. Zach indicated that Will and William stand to the side of the right-hand doorway as he slowly turned the knob and pushed it open. He entered the living room and ensured that it and the adjoining powder room were empty. A connecting door opened into a huge family room. There is a wall screen TV and comfortable furniture scattered around.

He signaled to Will to check the cabinets along the north wall and for William to back him up. Moving to the other door in the room, he found that it opened back into the hall. He closed it and waited for Will and his dad to finish checking the floor to ceiling cabinets. They contained movie and music disks and sticks, old-fashioned board games, card tables and chairs, infrared video and computer controllers and a wet bar.

William looked at him and shook his head. Zach nodded and jerked his head towards the hall door. They resumed their formation and moved out to the hall. On the left was a door to the mudroom and the back door. Zach eased it open and searched the room. There was a row of coats and boots along the wall and a washer/dryer on another. An open pantry filled the remainder of the room, its shelves full of canned and dry goods. After making a thorough inspection, Zach backed out of the room and closed the door.

Zach nodded to William, who eased open the door opposite the family room. This disclosed a large kitchen with pots gleaming from an overhead rack. The appliances were spotless. Will opened cupboards, revealing dishes,

more pots, small appliances and another and smaller pantry, also loaded with canned and dried goods. A loaf of bread in the breadbox was only a day or two old.

Through a pass-through in the kitchen wall, they saw that the room to the left of the front door was the dining room. A quick inspection yielded lovingly cared for sets of china, crystal and silverware. The table had a slight sheen of dust; the linens in the cabinet were crisp and clean.

William whispered, "This didn't happen more than a couple of days ago. That bread is pretty fresh and there isn't much in the way of dust on the furniture. There could be someone alive, hiding upstairs. Let's go real slow, here."

Zach and Will nodded in agreement and they began a slow, cautious climb of the stairs. Gently testing the treads and avoiding the ones that started to squeak, they managed to reach the second floor with minimal noise. The hall stretched in both directions, showing six doorways. Zach motioned Will to stay at the top of the stairs and keep an eye down the hall. Zach led William to the east end of the hall. He motioned William to stand to one side of the left-hand door and keep watch while Zach tried the knob on the opposite door. It opened into a small bedroom, decorated for a young girl. The closet contained clothes and shoes. There was nothing under the bed.

Exiting the girl's bedroom, Zach motioned to William to check his room. William gently turned the knob and swung the door open to a sewing/work room. There was a loom with a half-woven cloth, a sewing area with a laser controlled machine and a large needlepoint hoop by the window. William turned it around and Zach made out the finished pattern of an intricate pastoral scene. The closet held shelves of fabric, yarn and other craft

supplies.

They left the room, closing the door, and moved down the hall to another set of doors. Zach inspected the one on his side of the corridor and found a boy's bedroom. It was as neat as the girl's room.

William opened the door to the room opposite and stopped dead in his tracks. When Zach looked around him, he saw another boy's room. On the bed lay a woman with her hands crossed over her chest and a peaceful look on her face. There was a note pinned to her sweater. After checking out the room, William picked up the note and read it, and then handed it to Zach who read, "My name is Jane McGregor. No one has come and I can't stand the loneliness anymore. I am going to be with my family."

Zach looked at William and shook his head at the timing. She hadn't been dead more than two or three days. If she had waited, they would have come. William picked up an empty bottle from the bedside table. It had contained a powerful painkiller.

Zach left and moved down the hall. He didn't try to be quiet, since there didn't seem to be any reason. The next door opened to the master bedroom, where they found the rest of the family laid out. The father had died long enough ago to be a dried husk. Two boys had died in the last year and the girl in the last couple of weeks. They made a cursory inspection of the attached bath and walk-in closets. The final door was a large bathroom with a linen closet filled with towels, washcloths, sheets, pillowcases, spare soap and toiletries.

A set of pull-down stairs, with creaking and protesting springs, led up to an attic filled with boxes, trunks, furniture and the usual flotsam and jetsam of a house lived in for generations.

When they had finished with the inspection, Zach said to William, “Go ahead and bring the family in. Don’t let them come upstairs. The couches in the family room will make up into beds for the kids and you and Sandy. I’ll bed down in the living room on the big couch.

“Tomorrow, we’ll dig graves and bury these people. I have no idea why she didn’t. While we do that, Will can take the kids and search through the barn and outbuildings to keep them out of the way.”

By the time they returned, Zach had made up the hide-a-beds with sheets and blankets from the linen closet and pillows from the empty bedrooms. While Sandy got her brood washed and started a batch of spaghetti from the pantry’s supplies, Zach blocked off the stairs with chairs from the dining room, explaining that it wasn’t safe on the stairs.

After dinner, the dishes were washed, dried and put away. Sandy couldn’t bear to leave a mess, even though she knew the woman of the house was past caring, and they settled in for the night.

Zach was up early and made a round of the buildings and the road, looking for new tracks, but he found nothing disconcerting. By the time he returned from his patrol, Sandy had the kids up and was feeding them eggs and cornbread.

“Mr. Zach, mom found eggs under the chickens,” Donny piped up, stuffing another bite into his mouth.

Zach tousled his hair in passing. Sandy handed him a cup of steaming coffee and a plate. “Pretty simple. This afternoon I will make bread and put up a batch of cinnamon rolls for breakfast. We will be here for breakfast tomorrow, won’t we, Zach?” she asked in a hopeful tone.

“We will, Sandy. Today we have chores to do. I will leave it to you

to sort out what we can take. I made a list, things like food, sewing supplies and a change of clothes for all of us, if the sizes are right. When you are done with that, we will reload the cart and packs.

“Will, you take the kids to the barns and see if there is anything useful. Be sure to explore carefully and take your time. Understand?”

Will shot a quick glance at the kids and nodded.

William came through the mudroom, drying his hands on a clean towel. He nodded to Zach, indicating that he wanted to speak with him privately. He led Zach into the living room, out of earshot of the rest.

“There’s a small backhoe with a bucket on the front, along with a bunch of tarps. They’re in the garage, along with the family car. There is enough fuel and oil for the job of burying the family. I scouted a place back of the pens. It’s on high ground, overlooking the river. A real nice spot.”

Zach gave him a light slap on the arm and said, “Good work, William. As soon as Will gets the kids out of the way, we can bring them down.”

After a few minutes the sound of the back door slamming announced that the kids had gone off on their exploring expedition with Will. Sandy went upstairs to start sorting out the contents of the sewing room and closets. Zach and William headed to the garage.

William stacked the tarps in the bucket while Zach topped off the fuel tank. The large farmer barely fit into the driver’s seat of the small machine. He started it up and followed Zach down the drive to the back door. They each took an armload of tarps and entered the house. Zach paused at the bottom of the stairs and took a deep breath, then led the way to the bedroom.

He spread a tarp on the floor next to the bed and, with William’s help, lifted her off the bed. They wrapped her up and used duct tape to seal the

package. After taking her out to the landing, the two men entered the master bedroom and wrapped each of the other corpses, one-at-a-time, carrying them out to the hall. When the last of the bodies had been wrapped, they carried them down to the mudroom and then to the bucket of the backhoe. A final tarp was used to seal them into the bucket and William started it up and headed for the burial site.

Zach stopped by the tool shed and picked up a shovel before he followed William to the site he had picked out. Once there, they unloaded the bodies and William dug a common grave. Zach lined the grave with the biggest tarp and took the bodies as William lowered them into the hole. He arranged them as reverently as he could and William hauled him out, using the backhoe.

William made a quick job of filling in and tamping the hole before he shut the backhoe off and got down to stand beside Zach with folded hands and a bared head. "Lord, accept these poor souls into your keeping. Please, forgive them the trespasses they committed in this world and remember their good deeds. While you are at it, Lord, please, look after my family and this good man next to me. Amen."

When they returned to the farmhouse, they saw the two younger children tugging on their mother's dress, almost dragging her to the small barn. Will looked over at his father and shrugged his shoulders. Zach and William looked at each other and William turned the backhoe to follow the rest of his family.

The barn was cool and smelled of hay and dust and leather. Dust motes danced in the sunbeams amongst the harness hanging neatly on nails and hooks. At the far end of the barn under the shadow of the loft, stood a

large mound of hay. Zach had noticed it on the previous day when he reconnoitered the farm. With closer study, there was something odd about it.

Will sidled up to the men and said, “I told them that it wasn’t practical, but they were so excited about it that I couldn’t stop them from bothering mom.”

As he finished, Donny and Janey had dug into the hay until they uncovered a wheel. Sandy had to rescue them after dislodged hay had cascaded down. With Zach, William and Will working with Sandy and the younger children, they soon had the wagon cleared. Faded lettering on the stake sides proclaimed “Hay Rides – 25 cents”, underneath was “Sponsored by the Masonic Lodge”.

“Mom, see how big it is. We can carry everything you want,” piped up Janey, with a happy grin on her dusty face.

Sandy absentmindedly brushed straw out of her daughter’s hair. “It is a wonderful surprise, Janey, Donny. Thank you so much for thinking of me, but how will we pull it. It is much bigger than the cart and that is heavy enough.”

The children looked stricken. They obviously hadn’t thought of that. Their shoulders slumped and they looked so depressed that Sandy knelt and gave them each a huge hug.

Will tapped his father on the shoulder and beckoned him to follow as he headed for the door. Zach and William trailed along as Will walked to the large barn and entered. There were ten stalls down each side and a row of bins running down the center of the massive structure. There was a hayloft at the far end. Will had stopped about a third of the way down the line of bins. When the men had joined him, they saw that one of the bins had been broken

open and a small amount of oats was trampled on the floor.

“Very interesting, Will,” said his father, “but what is the significance of a broken feed bin?”

“Nothing,” replied his son, “except for the droppings.” He pointed to the floor of the barn. It was littered with droppings, some old and dry and others fresh.

Zach was puzzled at the significance of all of this, but he saw the understanding dawning on William’s broad face. William squatted and poked the scat with a large, blunt finger. He nodded his head as he stood and idly wiped his hands on his overalls.

“How long?” he asked his son.

“Could have been last night or maybe the day before.”

“Will someone tell me what is going on? I don’t see why you two are so excited about horse dung. Remember, I’m just a city boy,” Zach broke in.

“Well, this shows that there have been horses in here over the last several days. As you can see from the condition of those four stalls, they were occupied until just recently. I think that the lady let them go before she killed herself. From the size of the piles and prints, these were big horses. They might still be around here or, even, come back occasionally to search for food or whatever.”

“Do you think we should go hunting them?” asked Zach. He was interested, but the thought of chasing horses didn’t hold much appeal for him.

“No, their tracks would be too hard to sort out, but we can set a trap for them, if they return. Will, go to the kitchen and get a box of those sugar cubes from the pantry.” As Will hurried off, William turned to Zach, “You and I will have to rig some way of closing the barn door if they come in. I

think we can hook a rope to the handle and string it to the corner of the barn.”

Zach finally understood the plan and set to with alacrity. They soon had two ropes tied to the barn door and practiced pulling it shut in one smooth motion. When Will returned with the sugar, they placed mounds on several of the bins. William decided that the horses wouldn't return until later in the afternoon and they went to the house for lunch.

Sandy was cautiously optimistic about their chances of capturing the horses and made an additional pile of clothes, food and books, on the chance that they would be using the wagon when they left. She picked out several trunks in the attic and Zach and William dragged them to the head of the stairs, after she unpacked them, raising a storm of dust in the confined space of the attic. They all escaped down the stairs, dusting themselves off and coughing.

“Dad!” yelled Will from downstairs.

“Now what,” said Zach, leading the charge for the staircase, grabbing up his rifle from the stair railing where he had leaned it before going up to the attic.

They found Will standing in front of an opening under the stairs. A hidden door had been built into the paneling. Will had noticed a hole just under the chair rail and, when he pushed his finger in, had tripped the spring latch. Zach pulled the laser flashlight out of his pocket and shined the bright light into the cavity. There was a rack containing a rifle and two shotguns and a shelf with several dozen boxes of ammunition, a cleaning kit, a filled three-pistol rack and various other items unidentifiable with the cursory examination allowed by the light. Dust covered everything.

When it had all been pulled out, the inventory included a .30-06

Marlin, two 12-gauge shotguns, three .357 magnum Smith and Wesson pistols, thirteen boxes of ammunition for the Marlin, twenty-five for the shotguns and nine for the three .357 magnum pistols. In addition to cleaning kits for the weapons, there was a fishing tackle box of repair tools and a cardboard box of moulds and reloading equipment for the weapons. Several ingots of lead and a case of five thousand primers and an assortment of shell casings rounded out the lot.

Zach looked at William and said, “William, old son, it seems to me that there is a member of our party who is grossly under armed. I mean, one really needs power when defending a family. No, it seems to me that there is a perfect candidate for the .30-06.”

William, playing along, rubbed his chin as if pondering. “Zach, I’m not sure Sandy can handle that much gun. The little kids are way too small for it. No. I can’t think of anyone who could handle that much gun. I know I’m no good with a long rifle.”

Both men laughed at the look of disgust on Will’s face. Zach picked up the rifle and handed it to him and William gave him two boxes of shells. They told him to give his .22 to Janey, without shells, and they would teach her how to use it safely.

Zach picked up the shotguns and motioned William to follow him. One of the outbuildings was set up for a workshop and the men spent the rest of the afternoon cutting down the two spare shotguns and dry firing them.

By the time they had them to their satisfaction, it was getting to be late afternoon and they went to the house to collect Will. They gave Sandy the two loaded, sawed off shotguns and told her to keep Donny and Janey inside until they returned. Donny was in a rebellious mood since Janey got Will’s

old rifle and was pouting in the family room.

The three men cautiously approached the barn, in case the horses had already returned, but nothing stirred and the sugar was undisturbed. Will climbed into the loft with several small stones to take up his lookout post at the loft door. He would toss a rock when he saw the horses coming and another when they had all entered the barn. William and Zach would hide around the corner of the barn until the second stone and then they would grab the ropes and pull the door closed.

Zach was dozing when, an hour and a half later, the first rock thumped into the ground near the corner behind which they were hiding. They heard the snorts and soft hoof falls a few minutes later and the echo of hooves as they entered the barn. When the second rock hit the ground, William and Zach each grabbed a rope and pulled the door shut. The horses skittered around at the rumbling of the closing door, but quickly settled down.

Will gave them the thumbs up sign and William waved back. Zach led the way to the barn's back door and hesitated. William checked his pockets for more of the sugar cubes and some horse nuts and waited for Zach to enter. "Ah, old son, why don't I wait out here and make sure that there aren't any more horses while you and Will look these over?"

William laughed and poked Zach in the chest, "Don't tell me you're scared of a little old horse! Come on, they won't hurt you."

"I'll wait out here, if you don't mind. Like I said, I'm a city boy and I'm a little nervous around a side of meat that moves on you." Zach walked away from the door, trying to look like he was calm and composed.

William laughed again and entered the barn to see about his new charges. A little later Will let out a laugh and Zach's ears burned with the

embarrassment of being nervous around livestock.

The next morning William and Will laid out the harness for the wagon and attached the tongue to the bed before taking hackamores and bringing in the horses. Each one stood over seventeen hands high and they looked like monsters to Zach. The first horse Will led in was a gray gelding. When he saw the wagon, he sidled over and moved into position without any encouragement from his handler. The second, a bay stallion, did the same. The roan mare and the bay gelding followed suit, each standing along the tongue as if waiting for a parade. William and Will arrayed their equine charges in harness and strung the reins to the wagon box.

William, saying that he hadn't driven a team of horses since he was a youngster on his grandfather's farm, climbed onto the seat and gathered the reins in his massive hands. Will and Zach opened the doors and William gave a gentle slap with the reins to start the team.

They moved out and William guided them into a circle of the farmyard, first one way, then the other. Sandy, Donny and Janey came out to the porch and clapped. William put the horses through their paces for half an hour and finally pulled up in front of the front porch steps. "Your chariot awaits, madam," he said with a bow.

Sandy laughed and replied, "They sure don't make chariots like they used to."

While William and Will unhooked the team and led them back to the barn for feed and water, Zach followed Sandy and the children inside. He slumped comfortably in a kitchen chair and said tonelessly, "Sandy, it looks like we can take a lot more now with the wagon. Will and I will bring the trunks down after dinner. You can load them up with clothes and such. Pick

out the best mattress and a lot of bedding, too. We will help you go through the pantry and load up as much food as possible. Oh, that reminds me, there is a lot of home canned stuff in basement.”

Sandy looked at him for a moment. “What’s eating you, Zach? You don’t seem as excited as the rest of us about the wagon. Is there something wrong with it?”

Zach sighed. “No, nothing wrong with the wagon, per se, but, with it, we are still stuck on the roads. A wagon this big will be impossible to hide, unlike your little cart. Less chance of keeping a low profile or hidden. Any reavers will hit us just because of the wagon. I don’t know, guess I have been sneaking along for so long that I get nervous when I’m conspicuous.

“Be sure to load toys and books for the kids. I saw a lot of games in the family room and books in the bedrooms, upstairs.” He rubbed the back of his neck and headed for the bathroom to wash up for supper.

The next morning, Zach made his rounds of the farm and found everything quiet. As he climbed the front porch stairs, he glanced into the wagon at the four trunks, the mattresses from the kids’ rooms, the barrel loaded with long-handled tools. Another barrel held an assortment of tack. A large toolbox was loaded with hand and leather tools. A cedar chest contained an assortment of blankets and pillows. Three sacks held oats and straw. There were several jerry cans of water and crates of foodstuffs. There was still enough room for a carton of books and one of games. He shook his head and hoped the horses could pull all of it.

Bacon and eggs were cooking and the table was set for their last meal in the farmhouse. The best china and silver was laid out. William had opened a bottle of champagne found in the cellar, to celebrate the day. Zach forced a

smile on his face and joined the Smiths.

After breakfast, Sandy and Janey washed the dishes while William and Will took another tour through the outbuildings to see if they had left anything useful behind and to get the horses. Donny explored the game cupboard for the umpteenth time to make sure that he got the best games, agonizing over his decisions. Zach fetched a small wine box, with the dividers still inside. He loaded the box with bottles of liquor from the wet bar, for medicinal purposes, he told himself. He mused that he probably watched too many old Westerns as a child as he loaded it onto the wagon.

He heard a noise behind him and turned around to see Sandy standing in the doorway with the silver box in her hands. When Zach grinned at her, she got defensive and said, “Well, they would just get stolen by some reaver and, besides, I never got any good silver when William and I got married.” Zach reached up and took the box from her and packed it away in the trunk assigned to him, making room by taking out several shirts.

“You realize, don’t you, that this means you will have to do my laundry more often, woman.”

“Wash your shirts? You just take that box out of there, the slaves were freed near two hundred years ago and I am NOT bringing it back for a box of gewgaws.” Sandy turned and walked in the house in mock fury. Zach laughed and followed her. When he entered the house, he noticed another box by the hall tree. He discovered it contained the fine china and suspected that it would have been snuck on the load if he hadn’t been there. With a grunt, he lifted it and managed to find room for it.

The horses were harnessed and the last minute items tucked in corners. William had a set of fancy hairbrushes, Will casually put in an

antique Cavalry sword, Donny managed to cram three more games in two of the trunks, Janey hid an American Girls doll in the barrel with the long tools. Zach winked at William when he saw Sandy looking around for something. She finally gave Zach a long look and poked about in the wagon until she saw the box of china. When she got down, she gave him a sharp poke in the ribs and mouthed a thank you.

Zach left his pack and sniper rifle with the wagon and, taking his carbine, he headed down the road towards the front gate. When he determined that the coast was clear, he stood up on the fence post and waved the wagon on. They had decided that the best course was to head west until they came to a crossroad and take it north. It was a smaller lane and there were several farms off it. The map showed that the northerly road cut through a small patch of forest then turned west again.

They traveled on back roads for several weeks. They managed to resupply at deserted farms. Any places with signs of life were avoided. Lincoln, Nebraska was a glow on the horizon when they passed it. Zach was aiming for the hilly country north of the Platte River.

The crossroad showed no signs of travel. Zach clung to the side of the road where a long row of cottonwoods had been planted. Even though several were down, there was enough cover for him to stay hidden. The songbirds were a sign that nothing was moving and the heat of the morning sun felt good on his back.

He smelled smoke and stopped, settling into a crouch. He gathered a handful of grass and piled it in the middle of the road. Will, who should be walking a hundred yards or so in front of the wagon would know that something was wrong and warn his father.

Zach checked to make sure the safety was off and that the extra clips were handy before he continued. He approached the curve in the road, his eyes looking for signs of danger. Beyond the bend, the road to the first farm led off to the right. Stopping behind the last maple, he lay down, removed his hat and peered around the bole. A thin column of smoke was rising straight into the sky where a gentle breeze scattered it. Nothing moved on the drive or in the fields on either side of the main road.

He wiped his hands on his jeans and crawled through the barbed wire fence into the field of tall grass. Keeping to a crouch, he slowly moved parallel with the drive until he could see the ruins of the farm. He advanced to make a wide circle around the farmyard, seeing two bodies lying in the grass in the middle of the turn around. Behind the barn, he came upon a fresh trail of trampled grass, leading in the direction of the second farm. He walked to the bodies and saw they were an older couple and both had been shot. The tracks were too confusing to make out the number of attackers.

There was a shed that hadn't caught fire and he moved the bodies into it. After another look around, he headed down to the road and met Will, hiding behind the same maple Zach had. Zach explained the situation and told him to have the wagon brought up.

William was for going back, but Zach convinced him that they had to push on. He sorted through his collection of maps and took out a detailed view of the area. He located and pointed out a trail through the woods.

William drove to the track. Zach scattered dust and leaves at the head of the trail to hide the faint signs of the wagon's passage. He continued kicking leaves over the trail until he met up with Will.

"Dad has the wagon hidden in a hollow behind a small hill. Mom is

scared and the kids, too.”

Zach followed Will to the hiding place, continuing to scatter leaves and twigs over the trail. William had straw down for the horses and a bucket of water drawn from the nearby stream. He and Sandy held shotguns and Janey looked determined with her .22. Zach was glad they hadn't loaded it, yet, afraid something would startle her and it would go off.

Going to the wagon, Zach smiled as he lifted down Donny and Janey. He gave them books and sat them on a fallen log, cautioning them to sit quietly. He picked up some pebbles from the stream and handed them to Will, asking him to climb the rock and toss a pebble if he saw anything.

He motioned Sandy and William over to where they could talk out of hearing of the children.

“I think we should stay here for at least the rest of the day. If we don't make tracks, there won't be anything to see. William, you and I and Will can keep watch. Sandy, can you make a cold lunch and keep the kids quiet? Sound will carry and we all need to walk softly.”

Just then they froze as a pebble rattled in the dead leaves. Zach gently motioned Sandy in the direction of Donny and Janey with a finger over his lips. With light steps, he hurried to the wagon and retrieved his sniper rifle and screwed on a silencer. He returned to William just as another pebble dropped in the leaves. They looked up and saw Will's anxious face. He motioned that something was coming along the trail from the opposite direction they had come.

Zach motioned William to move up as he waved to Will that he understood. The two men crouched behind some blueberry bushes where the trail rounded the hill, offering a view of the trail for about fifty feet. They

heard the muffled thud of a horse's hoof just before the animal and its rider came into view. The rider looked to be in his late teens. He was wearing an army jacket over a tee shirt, jeans tucked into riding boots and a red baseball cap. He carried an M-21 military issue with the distinctive S-magazine and grenade launcher. Every few steps, he pulled up his mount and listened, looking back over his shoulder.

Zach mentally urged him to keep riding. He didn't want the rider to fire a shot, since it would alert whatever was out there that was spooking him. As he came abreast of the two men, the rider slung his rifle and unscrewed the cap of his canteen. Making a split second decision, Zach leapt out onto the road and grabbed the reins, with William close behind. The rider made an aborted move for his weapon and slowly raised his hands when he saw the bore of the shotgun staring him in the face.

"Will? Anything else moving?" Zach whispered.

"Nope," Will whispered back.

"All right, you," Zach turned his attention back to the rider, "hand over your weapons, real slow and careful."

When the rider had handed Zach his rifle and the bayonet from his belt scabbard, he was ordered to dismount, searched and pointed in the direction of the camp. William nudged him along with the barrel of his riot gun and Zach led his horse in. Will scrambled down from his post, but William, angrily, told him to get back on watch.

"Sit down on that rock and stretch your legs out in front of you," Zach orders. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" he continued like he owned the land and was questioning a trespasser.

"Um, my name is Matt Busby. You aren't Mahdists, are you? No, I

can see you aren't. The females aren't veiled. Who are you?" Matt asked.

"Old son, when you have the drop on us, you can ask the questions. Now, what are you doing here and who's following you?"

"Ah, I'm a scout for the Mahdist recruits back at the crossroads. We are on our final training maneuvers before we get assigned to our regiments. I offered to scout this trail so I could escape. I don't know if the other scouts are doing the same thing, but I doubt it since they have family back at Blake, where the training barracks are."

"You can lower your hands. How many of you are there? Why are you scouting this trail? Hell, what can you tell us about all of this? There are reavers behind us and, now, Mahdists ahead. What is a 'Mahdists'?"

"The Mahdi is Saladin al-Allah. He has called for a jihad against all non-Muslims and anyone who doesn't agree with him. He has four regiments of about five hundred men each, split into five companies. His elite regiment is the Greens, they wear green baseball caps and then there are the golds, the blacks and the blues. I'm a red. That shows that I'm from a replacement camp. All males between fifteen and twenty-four are forced to join his army as janissaries. When they take an area, they build a training camp in the biggest town and, when they are done; they either burn the town or make it an administration center for the area. Blake is on the edge of the expansion, so it will probably be burned. The families of the recruits are kept at the training camp and if the recruit tries to escape or commits a crime, a member of the family is killed. When he has no more family, the recruit is killed. It's pretty effective.

"Anyway, my training class is on maneuvers. There are twenty-five of us. We are supposed to strip the land of any usable supplies, bring in all

captives and burn all buildings. The captives will be offered the chance to convert if they have skills the Mahdi needs. If they don't convert or are not useful, the adults will be killed and the little kids will be adopted by true believers, to be raised as Mahdists. If there are any boys of military age, they will be recruited and their families will not be killed, except like I told you. Their captors, as wives, can claim any girls over fourteen. My sister was claimed and I never heard of her again."

"Crap," Zach said. "What with the reavers and you guys, we could be in a lot of trouble. Where is your class now and, exactly, how many men there?"

"They are at the end of this trail, where it meets the main road. They are supposed to be setting up camp today and, after the scouts report back, start raiding the countryside tomorrow. There are, besides the twenty-five recruits, Captain Achmed Carson, four sergeants, four truck drivers and two lieutenants. The officers wear green turbans. Most of the troopers want to get away, you know."

"I know you have cooperated, but I am going to tie you up until we decide what to do with you. We won't harm you, so don't worry." Zach led Matt to the wagon and used plastic ties to bind his arms behind him, around a spoke in the wheel.

Sandy looked reproachfully at Zach as she gathered wood for a fire.

Zach climbed the hill to relieve Will, with instructions to get him after the family had eaten. Zach settled down to watch and think. He took out his pipe and dry smoked it, sucking on the empty bowl. Nothing about the situation looked good. They could expect a squad of murderers, armed with the latest military weaponry, to come riding down the road from the Mahdist

camp, or a bunch of murderers, intent on rape and pillage, coming down the trail from the burned-out farms behind them. By the time Will returned to relieve him, he had decided that the best thing to do was nothing. Just sit, wait and hope.

He joined Sandy and William at the fire. When he had filled his plate and coffee cup, he ate in silence. He could feel Sandy's stare and figured that her maternal feelings had come out. He ignored her until he had finished and tossed the dregs of his coffee in the fire, which hissed and smoked.

As he was about to say something, Sandy said, acerbically, "Can we, at least, furnish the prisoner with a last meal?"

William, looking miserable, tried to quiet her, but she continued, "Every condemned prisoner has a last meal, William. I am just asking if this one will have one provided."

Zach sighed. "Sandy, no one is condemned. I don't propose shooting him or hanging him or drowning him in the creek. I just don't know how much of his story is true. He could be a loyal Muslim, trying to trick us into trusting him so he can cut our throats; he may be just what he says he is; he may be a reaver scout, who got the clothes from some dead Muslim or something. Sandy, I just don't know.

"Take him something to eat and drink, if you want."

Sandy prepared a plate for Matt and shooed the younger children, who were staring at him with wide eyes, back to their father. She put the plate down and backed away. Keeping his pistol on the prisoner, Zach used his knife to cut the ties and backed off.

Matt chafed his wrists and attacked the food, betraying his hunger. When his plate was clean, Zach secured him again and brought the plate and

cup back to Sandy, who was washing up.

Keeping a smart aleck remark behind his teeth, Zach accepted another cup of coffee from William and said, "I figure the best thing to do is to sit here and wait all this activity out. Let the Mahdists and the reavers kill each other off, if they want. In a couple of days, we can do a scout and see what's what."

Sandy threw down her dishcloth and faced the two men across the small fire. "And leave those boys to get killed in some kind of religious war? William, you tell him what we talked about. Go on, now."

William knew what Sandy was like when she got this way and he knew that there was very little anyone could do to change her mind. He pulled at his left ear and cleared his throat. "Zach, I would like to help these boys. Sandy is right. They are just going to get killed or do a lot of killing. Matt said that most of them would back us, we would have some help getting across country and all," he finished lamely.

"Pardon me!?" Zach said. "You want the three of us to, to what, rescue some boys who don't even know they are being rescued and will, most likely, shoot us before we can tell them? Oh, and what about all the guys with green turbans? Do you think they will just let us waltz in there and whisk these kids away? With a 'please' and a 'thank you very much'? Not likely."

"Stop being so dramatic," retorted Sandy. "You heard Matt. They are going to scatter out in the morning and there won't be anybody left in camp. You just go in and take over. Wait for them to get back and capture them as they return to camp or something like that."

"You are both out of your minds. Let's say we can do what Sandy said. We go in and take over the camp. Those squads will not be easy to take 'as they come in'. What if several come in at once, or all of them? We will

have almost thirty well-armed troopers after the three of us. I may be good, but I can't see myself taking care of ten of them, when they come charging down on me."

Matt, who had been listening intently, broke in, "It wouldn't be as hard as you think, really. You have a silenced sniper rifle, don't you? If you can knock out the captain, the lieutenants and the sergeant who are at the camp, I can talk the rest of them into surrendering. I know I can. I grew up with some of them and trained with all of them."

"Okay, say we can take the camp and the, what, one squad which remains on guard. Two things, what about the other three squads and will they really support us if it means that their families get killed?"

Sandy spoke up, "After we save the boys, we just go to Blake and get their families."

"What? Now you want to, not only, save the boys, but also go into Blake and steal women and children? You are really out of your mind, Sandy. Oh, unless, Matt has a plan for that, too," Zach said sarcastically.

"Now that you mention it," Matt said, "I was thinking about it for a long time. How to get the troopers and their families out. I know how it can be done. On a Friday. During morning prayers. Everyone in town has to attend morning prayers. Even the Purity Police, the Mahdi's secret police. And no weapons are allowed inside the mosque and there are only two ways in. The two doors can be blocked from the outside, since they swing out, we can just block them so they can't be opened. The windows are barred," he quickly inserted when he saw Zach about to interrupt.

Zach took a deep breath to calm himself. "I know I am fighting a losing battle here, but what about afterward? With twenty-five troopers, I

would assume that there are somewhere in the vicinity of seventy-five dependants. How are we going to feed them, transport them, hide them, find enough water for them? Matt?”

“There are the trucks,” Matt said. “Four are with us. They are deuce and a-halves, capable of carrying fifteen men and we could squeeze more in. There should be plenty of room to take everybody. And there are several other vehicles in town.”

“I should just let you people storm in there and get yourselves all killed. But I like the kids too much for that. I couldn’t live with myself if I let Donny and Janey become orphans. I’ll tell you what; we go and look the situation over. If it is like Matt says and William and I both agree that it could be done, then we will try it. Agreed?”

William, relieved, said, “You couldn’t be more fair than that.”

Sandy obviously wanted a guarantee, but knew that she and William had pushed Zach as far as they could and she agreed.

At dawn Zach, William and Matt were on a hill overlooking the camp. It is set up on the crossroads where the east-west road intersected the track, which wandered out of the forest and continued as asphalt on the other side. The camp was set up on the south side of the main road and west of the track, where the stream meandered from the forest. A large marquee was positioned facing east, with a camp desk set for breakfast. The field kitchen was south of the tent and several men were scurrying about the stove, urged on by the baton of a man with a green turban. To the west of the officer’s marquee were four rows of two-man tents. At the north end of the two-man tents were larger tents, for the officers and sergeants, Matt said. A horse line was strung beside the road and a truck park was situated at the crossroads

After morning prayers, the troopers ate a hurried breakfast, saddled horses and formed parade in front of the marquee. A short, stout officer, with the inevitable green turban, harangued them for several minutes and three squads peeled off, while the last squad returned their horses to the horse line and unsaddled them. The other three squads, with one of the trucks each, headed west, north and south.

William wanted to return to the wagon, but Zach refused, pointing out that they were on foot and would be in plain site of the squad heading for them. He assured William that everything that could be done had been done. If nothing else, Will had his rifle and two pump shotguns and they would have to hope for the best.

Zach pulled the cover off his sniper rifle and inspected it, wiping off small smudges of dust, lovingly. He placed the rifle on the chamois bag and laid out a square of cloth. He emptied the clips, wiped off each shell with another chamois cloth and reloaded the clips. After inserting a clip, he snapped the lens covers off and activated the laser. He eased the barrel of the gun over the rise and sighted in.

He gave Matt his binoculars, knowing there would be no glare off the non-reflective lenses, and asked him to identify his targets. As Matt tolled off the targets, Zach swung the rifle at each in turn.

When he had finished identifying the targets, Zach asked, "In what order should I get them? Who is the most dangerous, the best leader?"

"The sergeant. He is the most veteran, having fought in the conquest of Illinois. The captain is a political appointee and will probably run at the first sign of trouble. The tall lieutenant, the one by the Humvee, is the radio operator, so he should be taken out second, then the other lieutenant. If the

truck driver, Andy Scales, makes a move for the Humvee, then he should be taken out.”

“Okay, the sergeant, the tall lieutenant, the second lieutenant and then the captain. Your job is to keep an eye on Scales and let me know if he makes the wrong move.” Zach rolled over on his back and shaded his eyes with his hat saying; “Wake me in a half hour, will you?”

William and Matt looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders in puzzlement.

With his eyes closed, Zach said, “If someone down there starts shooting, I don’t want the other parties to hear it.”

At William’s touch, Zach woke instantly. He rolled onto his stomach and picked up the rifle, jacking a shell in the chamber. He sighted through the scope and identified each of his targets. After three dry runs, he took a breath, inserted his finger in the trigger guard, pulled the trigger half way, let out half his breath and tightened the trigger. The recoil was minimal and he saw the sergeant’s head explode. Before the body fell into the fire, he swung the weapon to the tall lieutenant standing by the Humvee flicking the dust from his jacket. The shot that took him through the forehead slammed him against the body of the vehicle and alerted the remaining lieutenant that something was wrong. As he turned and ran to his compatriot’s body, Zach’s third bullet took him in the spine between his shoulders, driving him into the dust.

“What about Scales?” Zach asked.

“He dove under his truck”

Zach had been swinging around for his final shot. The captain was standing, having leapt from his chair and overturned his desk, sending papers flying. His expression was one of disbelief and then he was flung against the

tent ropes and rebounded on the table, shattering it to splinters.

Setting the rifle down, he took the binoculars from Matt and said, “Your turn, old son. Get down there and calm the troops. We’ll keep an eye on friend, Scales.”

As Matt slid down the hill to where his horse was hidden, Zach handed the glasses to William and asked him to make sure that the mechanic didn’t try to get to the radio. Just as he picked up his rifle, again, Matt rode down the trail and galloped for the camp. Only the troopers who had been cleaning the kitchen had been alerted to the attack when the sergeant died and fell into the cook fire. By the time Matt rode up, they had the sergeant pulled out of the flames and his burning clothes extinguished.

Matt pulled up at the edge of the troopers’ tents and called them around him. He spoke for several minutes and was, from the results, able to convince them to surrender. They moved to the kitchen and, after seeing the sergeant, quickly formed a line and sat with their hands behind their heads.

“What’s going on?” William asked, turning to Zach.

“Scales!” Zach snapped back and William hastily returned to his task.

“He’s coming towards Matt with his hands up.”

“Good, let’s join them, shall we?” Zach said and capped the scope and slid the rifle into its bag. He stood, dusted himself off and stretched his back to get the kinks out.

By the time they arrived at the camp, Matt had organized a burial detail. Zach had them remove the boots and any other serviceable clothing before the bodies were lowered into the graves. He particularly wanted the turbans saved. When all signs of the attack had been removed, Zach called the men together for a council.

“My name is Zach and this is William. Matt, here, wanted to release you and he enlisted our help. However, you are not out of the woods, yet. There are still three troops of cavalry out there. The three of us have worked out a plan, of sorts. Matt?” Zach finished up by gesturing to Matt.

“I, uh, we don’t want a battle. We want to take them by surprise before they can defend themselves. Anyone who wants to join us can. Those who don’t, we will leave in Blake when we get our folks out. Any questions?”

“How are we supposed to get the folks out of Blake?” Andy Scales asked.

“The only day they are vulnerable is on Friday, during prayers. We will wait until everyone is in the mosque and block the doors. We let them out in twos and threes; separate the Mahdists from the rest. Then we put the Mahdists back in the mosque, block the doors and take off.”

“Where will we go?” demanded a tall redhead.

Zach answered this, “West. Unless anyone wants to join the Fundamentalists in the South. I suggest that we head for the mountains west of here. Find a defensible position and start a new life. There are areas near Denver, for example. Or, we are open to other suggestions. First, however, we have to decide what to do about the foraging parties. I am assuming that they are scheduled back this afternoon?” His question was greeted with nods of assent.

Matt held up his hands for quiet and said, “We can’t take the chance that they all show up at once. We need to disarm them group by group and that means going out and meeting them. I suggest that Andy and two troopers stay here, in case any of the parties returns early. They can say that shots

were heard to the South, or wherever, and the rest went to investigate. We will take the Hummer with us, since Captain Carson never travels anywhere without it. We will scout the camp before we return and Zach will do his thing, if the other parties are back. Andy, do you think you can carry it off?"

"Sure, if I can pick who stays with me."

Andy selected Pete Burns and Don Wright to remain and the rest of the troopers hurried away to get weapons and horses. Within five minutes everything was ready to go. Matt led the way with three troopers following, William drove the Humvee and Zach, dressed in a turban brought up the rear. They traveled, roughly, half way when Matt heard the sound of a truck. He held up his arm to halt the small cavalcade and turned in his saddle to warn his men not to fire unless fired upon.

The forage party rounded a bend in the trail, the sergeant in the lead. He drew up in front of Matt, a puzzled look on his face. When he noticed the Humvee, he snapped a salute. Matt's rifle was covering him when he looked back.

"Sergeant, you are our prisoner. Drop your weapon and dismount, please."

The sergeant was dumbfounded. Here was the Captain's personal vehicle and he was either a prisoner or a traitor. He reached for his sidearm and Matt shot him out of the saddle. A trooper at the end of the line raises his rifle, but Zach fired first and dropped him. The rest of the troopers raised their hands.

Matt addressed them and they agreed to join. The party headed back to camp after loading the dead into the truck. Zach rode ahead and found the camp much as they left it. The two bodies were buried and, as they prepared

to ride north after the second foraging party, it was spotted up the road. Zach hastily donned the turban and took two troopers to the kitchen area. William ducked into the captain's tent and the rest of the troopers pretended to be cleaning their weapons.

The sergeant was jubilant when he rode up to the command tent. His party had looted two farms and the truck was packed with goods. He was thinking of the rewards he would surely get for his success. His smile faded when he reached the tent. He had expected the Captain to greet him.

Matt, who was stationed as if guarding the tent, saluted the sergeant and invited him to dismount and enter. "The captain is lying down, but had instructed that he be notified when the foraging parties returned," Matt said. As the sergeant ducked through the opening, William slammed the butt of the shotgun on his head and he dropped like a stone.

Don Wright led his troopers to the horse lines where the weary troopers were unsaddling. Unaware of any trouble, they were easily taken prisoner. Andy and a couple of troopers captured the truck driver. The captives were gathered to hear Matt explain the situation, but before he could say anything, two shots rang out and a trooper and the driver were cut down. Matt grabbed the rifle out of the killer's hands.

The boy, about sixteen, just stood there with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"William, take him into custody. The rest of you, calm down." Zach was worried that the shots had been heard or that a panic would ensue over the killings. "Matt, hurry up and tell them what's up while I get to the bottom of this."

He and William took the boy away and Matt quieted down the rest of

the troopers. Zach shook the boy and shouted, “What was that all about?”

The boy stood with his head down, cringing.

William put his hand on Zach’s arm and said, “Let me do this. You are frightening the lad.”

Zach released the boy and stood back, glowering.

“All right, son. He won’t hurt you. We just want to know why you killed those two men. Now, you’re a soldier, right? Take a breath and report.”

“The, the night my, my family was taken, those two were there. All of them took turns, you know, with my sister. We could hear her screaming, for a while. When they were done, they shot her.” He turned fierce eyes to Zach, “I don’t care if you kill me.” With that he collapsed in William’s arms and sobbed like there was nothing in the world except sadness.

Zach cleared his throat and walked back to the rest of the troopers, leaving William to console the lad.

Matt asked, “How is Mike?”

“Who?” Zach asked.

“Mike. Mike Sullivan,” answered Matt pointing towards William.

“Oh, um, Mike is getting over it. William is talking to him. He should be all right soon. Just leave them alone for now. What happened here?” Zach asked.

“They will all join us, of course. Do we wait for the last group or go after them?”

Andy walked up to them and nodded. “Life is getting interesting. There is still one group out and Sergeant Griffith is a veteran of a lot of campaigns. He may not be taken in so easily. The rest of the officers were

political appointees, but Griff is here because he lost an eye and the use of his left arm in the Battle for Peoria. He will be happy to tell you all about it any time you like. I've heard the story at least a dozen times."

"What do you suggest, then?" Zach asked.

"As soon as you get a chance, shoot him. You have the weapon for it," Andy said, indicating the chamois bag slung from Zach's shoulder.

"Thanks. Matt, get eight men saddled up. And find me another one to wear a turban. When we get close enough, I'll shoot this Griffith character and you take the rest. Try not to kill anyone. Oh, and don't include anyone with a grudge, will you."

The eleven troopers rode west and found the final foraging squad towing the truck. Zach noticed the lowering sun was behind the approaching troopers and the sun would be in his eyes for the shot. Matt rode ahead and saluted the sergeant. As they talked, Zach waited for Griffith to turn his head and, when he did, took his shot, knocking the sergeant off his horse.

Zach called to the other troopers to charge and the ten troopers swept down on the confused squad. They hadn't heard a shot, but did see their leader fall off his horse, something they had never heard of about the dreaded, one-eyed sergeant. By the time they had gathered their wits, Matt's men surrounded them. They heard Matt out and agreed to join the mutineers.

They buried Sergeant Griffith and decided to abandon the truck. The driver was mounted on the spare horse and the cavalcade returned to camp. They arrived at dusk to find Sandy and the wagon firmly ensconced in the camp. She had commandeered the captain's tent and was in her element, cooking for a large group of men. When asked what she was doing here, she replied that William had been worried and had gone out to check on them and

they decided to come in and that they had the utmost confidence that Zach would out maneuver Sergeant Griffith.

After dinner, Zach called a general meeting. He explained the plan, one more time. He asked for a show of hands of those who didn't have family in the town. Eight hands were raised and Zach assigned these to go with William, the wagon and the trucks. Andy was put in charge of the trucks and picked a trooper to drive. One of the original drivers had refused to join them and was tied up. He would be taken to Blake and released after the rescue mission.

Zach set sentries and ordered the troopers to get a good night's rest.

Chapter 3

Rescue

Spring 2041

So much for a nice, quiet little trip to the Rockies. First a wagon and horses, then a bunch of cavalry, with trucks. And it looks like we will soon have a pack of women and children and gammers. They do seem to be good kids. KIDS – maybe they just look like kids to me, ‘cause I’m such an old fart. Kids like this have been dying for millennia, the 17-24 year olds. Well, looks like I’m the one that needs to keep them from doing it too soon. They want to charge in and act like Ney’s cavalry at Waterloo. I hope they can stick to the plan, or we could have a bloodbath. By the time this is all over, we will have half the Mahdi’s army chasing us.

The following day, Thursday, was spent sorting out the supplies and discarding unnecessary items. Andy and Mike Stewart, the other driver, rode out to look over the broken-down truck. When they returned, late in the afternoon, they swore that it could be fixed, but Zach overruled them, saying that they need the gas more than the vehicle itself. Andy suggested leaving the wagon and taking the fourth truck instead, but Zach explained that the horses wouldn’t run out of gas, as long as there was water and feed. It was finally agreed that the fourth truck would be left, the gas siphoned off and any spare parts stripped.

The next morning at moonrise, Zach began shaking the troopers

awake. Sandy had coffee and biscuits ready by the time they had stumbled from their beds and gotten dressed. A half hour later, Zach and Matt led the thirteen remaining troopers east toward Blake.

They arrived just at dawn and waited for the call of the muezzin. While they waited, Zach synchronized his watch with Matt's and sent Matt and six troopers to circle around to the eastern edge of town. Exactly fifteen minutes after the call ended, Matt was to take his troopers and storm the jail, in case any of the local constabulary had remained. Once the jail, and its supply of arms, was secured, they were to head for the mosque and provide backup, if needed.

Zach had already identified the vehicles he would use to block the doors; one was a fire truck and the other a dump truck, both a block away behind the town hall. He assigned two troopers to cover each of the doors until the blockade was complete. He impatiently and repeatedly looked at his watch and became irritated that time was creeping by so slowly.

Finally, the call to prayer came and Zach could see people moving towards the mosque. He signaled his men forward and reached the edge of town just as the last of the citizenry entered the mosque and the doors were shut. The four covering troopers peeled away from the main body and Zach led his group to the town hall. They started the fire and dump trucks and Zach was thankful that the engines were the newer silent type, rather than the noisy, old diesel engines he remembered from his childhood.

With just minutes to spare, the tall, metal doors were blocked. The dump truck didn't brake soon enough and it shook the building. Immediately, cries of panic were heard from inside. When they found that the doors were jammed, more panic ensued and thuds as shoulders were used to try and free

the portals.

Within a few minutes, Matt rode up to report that the jail was taken. He handed Zach all of the binding straps that he found and Zach ordered him to set up sentries around the town and let him know immediately if anything showed up. Matt saluted, unconsciously, and rode off to carry out the orders.

Zach climbed around the fire truck blocking the main entrance and pounded on the door with the butt of his M-1. His men had collected the weapons left by the few military and police who remained in town. When he had gotten the silence he signaled for, he said, “You in there. We are members of God’s Army.” He made a face and shrugged his shoulders as if to ask where that came from. “Your town has been taken and if you don’t surrender, we will burn this unholy place down around your ears.”

A voice from inside asked, “What do you want with us? We are peaceful farmers and merchants. We are not wealthy and we don’t have much in the way of goods.”

“We want your surrender. If you do, no one will be hurt.”

“There are many soldiers on their way here. They will arrive at any time and destroy you. Leave now while you have the chance.”

Zach turned his head and shouted, “They won’t surrender. Get the fire ready and we will burn them out.”

“Wait, wait,” a different voice shouted in panic. “We will surrender. Open the doors and let us out.”

“We will open the doors just enough to let one person out at a time. Hand out the women and children first.” He climbed down from the rear bumper of the truck and nodded to the driver to ease it away until the door was pushed open enough for a body to squeeze through. A child was passed

through the entrance, followed closely by her mother. Zach aided her and held his finger to his lips to caution her to be silent. He had ordered the troopers to make sure that their families didn't cry out when they saw them and the evacuation of the women and children was accomplished with a minimal amount of noise, though with tearful reunions. They were escorted to the town hall to await the men.

When all of the women and children had been released, Zach had the men come out. As they exited the mosque, they had their hands tied behind them and they were led away to the town hall. Even the fathers and brothers of troopers were bound until Zach spoke to them. This met with some resistance, but Zach had his way.

An hour after the call to prayers the townspeople were assembled in the council chambers of the town hall and Zach stood at the podium to speak to them. The men and women were segregated on opposite sides of the room. Seven troopers stood around the room with their weapons ready. Several of the families were shouting at him because he refused to release the men. Zach just stood at the podium, occasionally raising his hands for silence, until the room finally quieted to a low rumble.

"I know you are unhappy about the current situation, but until you settle down, nothing will change. Now, do I have your undivided attention?" When the rumbling died down, he continued, "Good. A couple of days ago, the recruits, your children and brothers, declared their freedom from the Mahdi. We have come to you to give you an option. We are heading west to settle a new community and begin a new life without the Mahdists, Fundamentalists or any other group telling us what to do.

"We will set up a Republic, much as our forefathers did. I don't know

exactly where or what we will find there, but it won't be a theocracy, which forces the young men to bleed for some god or other. If we bleed, it will be for freedom and our own rights.

“No one will be forced to join us. I promised the recruits with families that they would have the opportunity to speak with you and let you make your decision.”

He turned to the women's side of the room. “Ladies, anyone who wants to join us, stand at the back of the room and those who don't, move to the front.”

After the crowd had split, the women and children who had elected to stay were taken to the jail and locked up. The rest were asked to return to their homes and gather what supplies they could carry.

“Gentlemen, you have heard the proposition. Those of you who wish to go with us step to the back of the room, those who don't, step to the front.”

Before any of the men could move, a voice rang out from a gray bearded man with a green turban, “You will all be punished! Allah will strike you dead for this sacrilege.” He struggled with his bonds and continued, “Break your bonds and strike the unbelievers dead!”

A man standing next to the imam, as large and dark as William, turned, bent and slammed his forehead into the imam's face. While the imam screeched in pain, the man shouldered his way through the crowd and approached Don Wright and said, “Cut me loose, son, we got a lot of work to do.”

His move started several more men moving to the troopers. Don's father stood beside his son and issued orders to the men as they were released, telling one to get his pickup to the square, another not to forget his tools. One

he held back from being released and looked up at Zach. “This one’s a traitor. He pretended to be friendly with us, but was always snitching to the Mahdists for favors. He stays.”

Zach replied, “Anyone else? You people make the decisions; I’m just a bystander, now.”

Mr. Wright or someone else in the crowd vetoed several more men and, finally, the remaining men were escorted, still bound, to the jail and the freed men scattered to their homes. Zach had warned them that they were leaving in two hours and to hurry to the square with what they were bringing.

Chaos reigned in the square as families began assembling, kids running hither and yon, and mothers and fathers calling, bundles were piled everywhere. In addition, four cows were added to the mix. Zach tracked down Charlie Wright, Don’s father, and asked for his help in organizing the mess. Charlie stood up on the plinth supporting the statue in the middle of the square and roared for quiet. The crowd calmed down enough for him to instruct those who had vehicles to load up and move to the edge of town on the west road. Finally, three wagons and two pickup trucks, mounted with small caliber machine guns, were loaded with food, clothing and whatever weapons were found at the jail.

Zach and Charlie started for the jail, Josh Blaine, of the troopers, stopped them. Charlie greeted the woman with him as Mrs. Blaine and Zach figured that this was the boy’s mother. He had been dodging men and women all day that tried to thank him and he was resigned that this was just another one of them.

“Zach, Charlie, my mom wants to talk to you about the kids in the jail.”

“Charlie, a lot of those kids were given to those religious freaks for adoption. It’s not right that we should leave them. Can’t you talk to him,” she pointed to Zach, “about it?”

Charlie patted her on the shoulder and said, “Yes, Mrs. Blaine, we’ll fix it. Don’t you worry?”

“You know the kids she’s talking about, Charlie?” asked Zach.

“Yeah. I know most of them and Mrs. Blaine, here, knows the rest. There are about ten kids, all told. How do you want to handle this, without causing a riot?”

“Well, we could take the women out one at a time, with any children and escort them to the mosque. When we get there, we could separate them?”

They proceeded to put the plan into effect and managed to take the adoptive children away with a minimal amount of trouble. When the women were safely moved to the mosque the men were escorted to join them, when the transfer was complete, the doors were blocked. Charlie expressed some concern that they wouldn’t be rescued for several days, but Zach reassured him that food and water had been provided to last several days and the driver would be released a day’s journey out.

Matt was assigned ten men and ordered to guard the rear. Several riders were stationed to the flanks and to scout ahead. The older men were issued the spare weapons and provided a guard for the caravan. The elderly and children were loaded into the vehicles, while the rest of the townspeople walked. Charlie explained to Zach that the Mahdists had confiscated most of the vehicles for military purposes and didn’t provide much fuel for civilian use. The two pickup trucks with them were constabulary vehicles and had only about a half tank of fuel each. There hadn’t been much fuel for the fire

and dump trucks, as they had about used up their allotment for the month.

Charlie had heard that the Mahdi had decided to keep Blake as a strongpoint for western expansion. They were expecting a contingent of cavalry and infantry from the Blacks any day. They were to build a permanent post and incorporate the recruits into their organization.

They had only traveled twenty miles that day and Zach suggested that the cows be set free to increase their speed. The women who needed the milk for their children overruled him, loudly. The next morning, the driver was released and given enough food and water for two days. They got an early start and made fifteen miles by noon, but a wagon broke down later in the day and precious time was lost winnowing through the loads from the other wagons to make room for essential supplies. By dark, the exhausted caravan had made an additional twelve miles.

The next morning, Zach had everyone roused by dawn and they were on their way an hour later. They traveled well making close to thirty miles that day and averaging nearer to thirty-five each day for the next week. The rear guard had not seen any movement behind them and Zach began to relax. On the seventh day after leaving Blake, they found one of the trucks from the Smith party, broken down. Late on the twelfth day, the point sent a message back that they had made contact with William Smith's party. By mid-morning they had joined forces.

They traveled under sunny skies and were buffeted by constant winds. Dirt had worked its way into everything. Tempers were short and grumbling was constant. They passed through abandoned towns along I-80, looted by reavers and burned out of spite. Finally, a delegation, headed by Charlie Wright asked to meet with Zach. They presented a list of demands,

but were surprised by Zach's attitude.

"I don't know why you are coming to me. I'm certainly not leading this expedition. The Smith's and I are heading towards the Wind River Range in Wyoming. The maps we have show a series of valleys which may be defensible and where we can start to rebuild. We got caught up in your troubles and took a hand to help.

"You come to me with a list of demands," Zach slaps the paper. "You want to stop and rest. Fine. Stop and rest. I'm not stopping you. Hell, take over one of these two by four towns or farms and set yourself up. But, don't come to me and make demands."

"You're right, Zach. We just went along with you 'cause we didn't have a plan and just wanted to get away from Blake and the Mahdists," Charlie said. He scratched his head and gave a rueful laugh. "We haven't elected anyone leader. We haven't voted on a plan. We haven't done anything except follow like sheep.

"Well, Mr. Zach, we're calling a general meeting and we'll decide. Is that fine with you?"

"It really doesn't matter to me, Charlie. I know where I'm going, the question is, do the rest of you want to tag along?" Zach replied and walked over to the Smith's fire for dinner.

After everyone had eaten, the members of the caravan came together in the early dusk. Charlie stood up and asked if anyone had an objection to him as chair. When no one objected, he said, "The reason we are here is to decide what to do. A lot of us are tired of traveling. We have gone most of the way across Nebraska and are tired of the wind and the dust. I don't know about you, but I'm not sure if these clothes are not a second skin." This

brought a laugh from the crowd and nods that they felt the same way.

He continued, “However, we don’t know that the Mahdists won’t still come after us. And there are bands of reavers around. You can see their handiwork in the burned towns and farms and ranches. We could stop anywhere around here and settle, but we would be open to attack from any direction.

“I would like to ask Zach to step up and outline his plan to you. I am asking you to hear him out before you ask a lot of questions. Zach?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I started out from Atlanta two years ago. I was headed to the Rockies. It’s taken me that long to get here. I am tired of traveling and want to stop, too. I just haven’t found a place to do it. When I decided to leave Georgia, I thought about heading for the Smokey or Appalachian Mountains, but I ran into too many people, hostile people. So, I decided to head west. There is not only a smaller population, but there are a lot more parks and preserves where there were, before the Troubles, no people. I figured to find a spot, build a place and take stock where I was.

“A while ago, I ran into the Smiths,” he indicated where William and his family were standing. “They were escaping from the Fundamentalists and were heading northwest. We decided to travel together until one or the other wanted to split up. So far, we have done okay.

“When we met Matt Busby, he asked for our help. I admit that I was reluctant to get involved, but I was convinced that we should help and we did. The result is here and now,” he said, holding up a hand with fingers spread. “We have killed almost a dozen Mahdi officers. We have stolen trucks and supplies. We have suborned twenty-five recruits. We have raided a Mahdist town, stripping it of supplies. We have ‘stolen’ its population and

fled,” he continued, pulling a finger into the palm of his hand with each point.

“If I was the Mahdi or his high officers, I couldn’t let this pass. We have thumbed our nose at him. The man is a zealot. He will chase us until he catches us and then he will kill us,” Zach paused and looked around the faces colored by the fire. “If we let him. If we let him, ladies and gentlemen. He has around two thousand men. He has the contents of several armories. If you try to withstand him on the open ground like this, you will be slaughtered.”

Zach drew a deep breath and continued, “I only see one option open to you. Find someplace where you can fort up. Someplace where the passes are narrow and closed in the winter with snow. Someplace with pasturage for cattle and fields for farming. This isn’t civilization anymore, people. This is build a civilization time, what our forefathers had to do when this country was still a wilderness. Learn to shear sheep and spin wool for clothing, learn how to use the plants around you for medicines. Grace Young, how do you make soap? Ms. O’Malley, can you make a moccasin, much less a pair of boots. Sven Beckstrom, you’re a handy man, how do you make lumber, shovels, weapons?

“These are all of the things we will have to do. Sure, we can become reavers, living off the bones of the world, destroying and building nothing. I, personally, don’t want that. Sure, in the beginning, we will take what’s available, but we have to become self-sufficient. I want to leave your children something when I am gone. I want to rebuild this nation, or just my little piece of it.

“Tomorrow, I am heading west, towards Mitchell, Wyoming. It’s a little tourist mining town in the northern Rockies. The Rockies and the Wind

River Range are a huge expanse of wilderness. The land there will support the Smith family and me. It will support the residents of Blake, Nebraska. But, I'm not telling you what to do and I don't expect anyone to tell me what to do." He abruptly turned and left the firelight, joining the Smith's where Sandy gave him a kiss and a hug.

Sven Beckstrom stood up to be recognized and spoke. "I have a pretty good idea how to make lumber, and I suppose I could manufacture a shovel or a hoe. However, that doesn't answer the question of where I will do these things," he said in his faint Norwegian accent. "Zach Banducci saved my son, Nils, from fighting for the Mahdi. I have thanked him before and I thank him again for that. But, the horses are worn out and we are almost out of fuel, again, for the trucks. If we go on at this pace, we will be carrying all our supplies.

"I feel that we need to rest. We need to repair our gear, find fuel. I don't agree with Zach about the Mahdi. We are too far from his stomping grounds. He is well rid of us and he has enough trouble with Illinois, Iowa and Missouri. We are small fry. Some day, when he has the men and time to spare, he might try to find us, but not now. We have time to rest."

After Sven sat down, the debate raged over the next several hours. Zach, finally, went to the wagon and rolled up in his sleeping bag and went to sleep. He wasn't aware, until the next morning, that they had voted him as the leader and agreed to follow him. He protested, but Sandy and William convinced him that he was the best man for the job.

The next morning, Charlie informed him of the decision and asked that they be allowed to take a day, now that they were by a good water supply, to wash clothes and bodies and work on repairs to the vehicles. Zach took a

tour of the camp, inspected the vehicles and had William look over the horses. When they met to compare notes, he agreed to the day of rest.

He had Matt take a squad and search along their back trail for any sign of pursuit. He sent other squads, under Curtis Dodge and Gregory LaTour, to the north and south to check out farms or towns for fuel and supplies. The last squad, under Luther Smith, he sent west to scout the trail and look over Sidney, Nebraska to see if there were any signs of danger.

The rest of the day resounded to the cries of children playing in the water and the buzz of conversation among the women washing and mending. The men were working on the vehicles, greasing axles, tightening bolts and repairing leather. As Zach watched them, he wondered at the changes, which had occurred during the last few decades. The urban population had become rural again, the cities decimated by plague, fallout and riots. The dependency of man on the horse for what machines had done, now that the fuel refineries had been destroyed or let fall into disuse. The freedom from electronics, no television, movies, radio and appliances that had defined their lives for so long was as good a thing as the downside.

While still musing, a rider galloped into camp from the east. Zach sprang to his feet and hurried to get the report. It was Ricardo Gonzales, usually one of the most easy-going troopers. Now, however, he was excited to near panic and was spreading the feelings to the others.

“Report,” Zach bellowed at the sweating trooper.

Ricardo snapped to attention and saluted before saying, “Sir, there is a dust cloud about thirty miles back. They are Mahdists, sir.”

“Charlie, try to keep some order, will you,” Zach instructed the large, black man. He turned back to the trooper. “Are you sure of how far back

they are? Where is the rest of your squad?”

“Sir, Matt thought they were that far back. He is watching with the rest of the squad. We know they are Mahdists, because we caught one of their scouts. He tried to run and we had to shoot him, but he was a Black, sir. Matt will try and get closer, tonight, and see how many there are.”

Zach thanked him for his report and called Charlie, William, Sven and Rafael DeLeon over. These were the men elected as a council for Zach. “Thirty miles is a half day for cavalry and one day for infantry,” Zach mused. “Charlie, what was the makeup of the troops sent to garrison Blake? Was it cavalry and infantry?”

“Yeah, Zach, it was,” answered Charlie.

Zach spread out a map on the hood of a truck, studied it, refolded it and spread out another one. He traced I-80 and placed his finger on a symbol. “Here is a rest area. Charlie, William and Sven, get the trucks and wagons loaded, take everyone, except the troopers and get them to the rest area. Have Doc set up a field hospital of some kind. This is just east of Sidney, NE. Set up a defensive position. If the Mahdists get by us, we will do as much damage as we can.

“If you see Luther, get him back here as quickly as possible. There are a couple of overpasses, just before the rest area. They don’t have on- or off-ramps, so they will have to swing wide or come down I-80.

“Oh, I want the machine guns dismounted from the trucks.”

He turned to Ricardo, “I want you to go after Curtis Dodge, north, and get him back here.”

“Rafael, find a fresh horse and someone to locate Gregory. Let them know the plan and to be careful.

“I’m going to find Matt and see what’s up with him.”

While the ordered chaos of getting the caravan organized and moving was going on behind him, Zach took a horse and, using the tank road in the center of the highway, sped east to find Matt. He rested his mount every hour. He inspected possible ambush sites in the light of the full moon. Dawn was waxing as he came up on Matt’s troop. After relieved greetings, Matt handed his binoculars to Zach and pointed to a field on the south side of the freeway. Zach made out a string of fires that marked the enemy camp.

“They are coming as fast as they can manage. There are two pickups with machine guns, twenty-five cavalry and fifty infantry, plus supply trucks and the command group. Somewhere in the neighborhood of ninety men. The good news is the infantry is exhausted. They have been marched hard and collapse each rest period. The cavalry range to the north and south, looting and burning. The pickups stay with the command post,” Matt reported.

Zach explained the disposition of the non-combatants and went on, “The idea is to set up an ambush, using the machine guns and other three troops. We will set up behind and on top of the overpass. You and your troop will stay far enough ahead to keep out of range. We will drop a red shirt near the ambush site in the tank road. When you get there, make a demonstration and pretend to flee. You will have to keep riding until you hear firing. I am hoping you can get the trucks and the cavalry to charge first, leaving the infantry to catch up. If we can destroy the cavalry and the machine-gun trucks, it might make their commander hesitate before committing the infantry,” he finished by saying it all depended on the other three troops getting back in time.

After pulling back several miles, Zach lay down to rest. He had been

without sleep for twenty-six hours, except for dozing in the saddle, and was asleep in seconds. Matt awoke him several hours later with a cup of coffee and an apology, “Sorry to wake you, but they are coming. We have to pull back.”

Zach gulped down the coffee and rolled up his sleeping bag. By the time he was finished; the rest of the troop was mounted and ready to go. Zach took a last look at the column advancing up the freeway and commented, “Why don’t they send out advance scouts?”

Matt answered, “They have grown cautious, since we took out the last couple. Besides, it is more profitable to loot. If I had enough men, I would set up an ambush at the next farmhouse. They send eight or nine men on each raid. Say, can you pick one of them off?”

Zach shook his head and returned, “I am hoping to sting them into charging, when we come to the ambush. I don’t want them to know we have a long-range weapon, at this point. Okay, I’m heading back to organize our little surprise, so take care and come home safe.”

Zach had traded his worn-out mount for one taken from one of the enemy cavalry. He mounted and trotted back towards Sidney, NE. By the time he arrived, the other three troops had assembled and were digging in on the west side of the chosen overpass. The machine guns had been set up in small copses of trees that had been planted on each side of the freeway, when there was still a highway department. A line of foxholes had been dug in the tank road and supported the machine guns. Three men were stationed on the overpass with Zach. A section of the retaining wall had been broken out to provide a low-profile position from which Zach could fire.

The troopers had been cautioned to be careful not to fire into their

comrades if they were following a target. They were to let any attackers through and one in five troopers was assigned to reverse their positions and take care of them. In addition, when Matt heard the first shot, he should be heading back and would hit those attackers who had gotten through the lines.

Zach, mentally, went over every possibility he could think of one more time. If the cavalry swung wide and flanked the troopers, the men on the overpass would warn those below, who would redeploy to meet the threat. If the cavalry couldn't be induced to charge without the infantry, one machine gun would be hurried up to the overpass.

Doc had set up a field hospital in the information center of the rest area. Thankfully, the water in the women's bathroom was still working. The men had set up a perimeter to defend the site. Both pickups were ready to transport the wounded. Zach made a mental note to get medics trained.

That day and the next morning passed quietly, but the nerves of everyone were screwed tight. By one o'clock, a small dust cloud or smoke was seen on the horizon. Matt and his troopers were visible over a rise by three o'clock and the enemy cleared the rise an hour later. By the time dusk had descended, Matt and his troop had arrived at the ambush site, hiding themselves behind the berm upon which the overpass was built. The enemy was filing into an adjacent field, several hundred yards east of the overpass, and setting up camp.

Zach met with Matt and the other troop leaders. "The only problem we could face is that farm to the south of us. I think it is hidden by that rise to the southeast, but, as soon as the Mahdists move out, they will see it and send cavalry to loot and burn it. Matt, we have to get them to charge before that happens. At dawn, I want you to be in position to play your part in our little

drama. As soon as the cavalry starts out, I will plant a few shots and you hoot and holler and fire a volley at them. As soon as I give you the word, get down the road until you hear us engage them.”

Matt nodded his understanding and asked, “Do you want us to hit them tonight? Keep them on edge?”

Zach shook his head and replied, “I would like it, but if they chase you and spot that farmhouse, it could mess up our plans in several ways.”

He turned to the rest of the leaders. “Gentlemen, let your men get some rest. Relieve the lookouts on the overpass every two hours. Now, get some sleep, yourselves. I want everybody in position by dawn. We can expect action in the first hour. Again, I want you to caution your men about firing into other positions.

“If there are no questions, let’s break it up.”

Zach did not know how much sleep the rest got, but he did not get much. Every sound snapped him out of what sleep he was getting and it took a while before he dropped off again. Finally, he gave up the struggle and, just as the sky was changing from velvet black to navy blue, joined the sentry on the overpass, carrying his rifle in its chamois bag and his M-1. He sent the sentry to get something to eat, one of the MREs they had taken from Blake.

There were no signs of activity from the enemy camp, outside of smoke from the cook fires. Zach removed his rifle from its case and uncovered the lenses. He took a preliminary sweep of the freeway, but nothing was moving. After he had emptied the three clips, wiped the shells and reloaded the clips, he took another look down the road. Two horsemen appeared on the crest of the hill. Zach called down to Matt to take his position, but not to fire, yet.

When Matt and his troop appeared, one of the riders turned back to camp and within ten minutes there was a line of cavalry across the freeway. They sat their horses while an officer rode a few paces forward and trained binoculars on Matt and his men. When the officer waved his men forward, Zach slid his rifle through the breach and took aim at him. When Zach had the officer in the crosshairs of the self-adjusting sites, he called for Matt to fire his volley.

The burst of noise scattered birds that had been nesting in the fields. Zach fired at the same time and knocked his target off his horse where he lay splayed on the roadway. His second shot took a trooper in the left side of his chest and spun him off his horse. The Mahdist cavalry raised a shout and spurred down the road. Zach slid the rifle back into its bag and picked up the M-1. He heard Matt and his troop wheel their horses and gallop off westward.

The Mahdists screamed challenges at the fleeing riders and swept under the overpass. The first zip of the machine guns signaled a general firing from the entrenched troopers. Screams of wounded horses and men erupted as the trap was sprung. No one could endure the amount of fire for long and the Mahdists fired a hasty volley and the survivors wheeled their mounts and fled.

Zach and the three troopers on the overpass began firing as the first of the fleeing cavalry passed under them. Of the twenty-one Mahdists, only two managed to reach the line of infantry assembled at the crest of the hill from which the charge originated.

Zach sprang to the west retaining wall and witnessed the final shots. He called for the machine guns to be brought up to the overpass. Matt's troop raced after the loose mounts. A pile of men and horses formed a windrow

across the freeway. Zach ordered several troopers to search for survivors and put any seriously wounded animals out of their pain, while he guarded them from above. One Mahdist trooper struggled to bring his weapon to bear and Zach shot him. There were three Mahdists still alive and they were loaded onto the trucks, after they were searched for weapons. One of the troopers from Curtis Dodge's troop was the only fatality, though there were several with minor wounds.

As the machine guns and ammunition reach the overpass, one of the sentries called for Zach. He turned to the east and saw the infantry being massed for a charge. As he stared in wonder at the stupidity of the enemy commander, the infantry was ordered to attack. Zach swiftly swapped weapons. He took aim at the gunner on one of the pickups and blew him over the tailgate. He lowered his aim and put a shot through the radiator of the same truck as it topped the rise and was exposed over the heads of the infantry. His next shot hit the driver of the second truck and it swerved and overturned in the ditch at the side of the road. Shifting his aim again, he took out a green turbaned trooper, then another. His final shot hit the commander of the attacking force.

This broke the morale of the attackers and they fell back over the rise towards their camp, despite the blows from the remaining green turbans. A trooper was ordered to the machine gun on the first truck and Zach killed him and two others in rapid succession.

"Cease fire!" Zach yelled as the last of the infantry retreated over the rise. "Casualty check, Matt!"

Matt looked up and shouted, "Two dead, three wounded. We are sending the wounded to the hospital, now."

“Thanks. Listen up, everybody. If they charge again, fire one burst over their heads. There are only a half-dozen officers left and I can nail them as they charge. We don’t want to kill anymore of the infantry than necessary, I think they are ready to break, now,” Zach ordered.

“Zach,” yelled George Petrie, one of the sentries.

Wheeling to the other side of the road, Zach snatched up his rifle and changed to a fresh clip. His first shot took out the soldier climbing into the truck. His second hit the machine gun itself. He hoped that the shot disabled it. At that moment, a wave of infantry flowed over the rise. Zach took out one of the cavalrymen and two green turbans. The attackers hesitated and retreated back over the hill. The bodies of a dozen of the enemy were all that remained.

Zach kept his scope trained on the remaining pickup to prevent its machine gun from being manned. After a few minutes, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and when he refocused, he heard a burst of firing and, a few minutes later, saw a white cloth waving over the rise, followed by the raised arm and head of the man carrying it.

“Matt, take your troop and see what he wants. Don’t go closer than the first row of bodies and be ready to beat it.”

The troop walked their horses, spreading out into a skirmish line as the lone figure advanced, still waving the white flag. Matt halted at the closest line of twisted bodies and waited. The Mahdist halted in front of Matt and after a short conversation, Matt sent a trooper to get Zach.

“Sir, are you in charge?” the Mahdist asked when Zach approached.

“Yeah. What do you want?”

The Mahdists looked surprised and glanced at the white flag to verify

that it was there, “Why, we want to surrender, sir. We have wounded and, well, we want to surrender,” he finished lamely.

“Get your officers out here and we will talk about it,” Zach replied.

“Uh, all, ah, all the officers are dead, sir. We, we killed them. They wanted us to come again and, well, we didn’t want to go. They were going to shoot us, if we didn’t, so we, we just shot them first.” The Mahdist looked as if he were going to cry.

Zach turned to Matt and said, “Bring up the ambulances and Luther’s troop.” He turned back to the Mahdist and said, “Have your men bring their weapons, held over their heads, ten feet down the rise, turn around and lay their weapons on the ground and turn around. Then I want them to march down the road fifteen yards and sit down with their legs stretched out in front of them and their hands clasped behind their heads. If you have wounded which can’t be moved, bring their weapons.

“Luther,” he addressed the troop leader, “take your men and circle around. Use binoculars and make sure that things are kosher before you enter the camp. We will secure the prisoners and bring up the ambulances for their wounded.”

He turned back to the Mahdist and asked, “How many are wounded and how many are mobile?”

“There are, about, a half-dozen wounded and twenty-five mobile, sir.”

“Okay, go back and let your men know our terms. If there is any trickery, we will kill every last one of you.”

“Oh, no, sir, there will be no tricks.”

Five minutes after the boy had disappeared over the rise, he returned, followed by the rest of his troops, their hands over their head carrying their

weapons. They followed Zach's instructions to the letter and the three remaining troops and the ambulances advanced to take them prisoner. Luther appeared and reported that the camp was secure. He looked pale.

While Curtis and Gregory led their squads in securing the prisoners, Zach and the ambulances, protected by Matt's squad, returned to the camp. Bodies were scattered everywhere. Most were green turbaned officers with a few common soldiers among them. Luther's men were giving water to the wounded or inspecting the contents of the supply trucks.

Doc White and his wife went to work immediately caring for the wounded. By the time they were stabilized, the dead had been moved to the brink of a small gully, the supply trucks moved off to join the main caravan at the rest area, after the surrendered weapons had been loaded and the horses gathered.

Zach laid a hand on Doc's slumped shoulder and asked, "Is it okay to move them, Doc? We need to get back."

The weary physician took a deep breath and stripped off the bloody gloves he was wearing and tossed them with others in a bucket. "You know, Zach," he said, "useless death tires me out more than anything. I had hoped I was through with this after we left Blake." He looked Zach in the eyes and it seemed that he had aged decades since the last time Zach had seen him. "Two more died," he continued, pointing to two bodies covered with blankets.

"These conditions. I know how the surgeons during the War of Southern Secession felt." At the puzzled look on Zach's face he said, "The Civil War to those of us who aren't purists. A civil war is one in which two sides are trying to take over the same government from inside. A war of secession is one party trying to break away from an existing government and

establishing their own.”

Zach was relieved when Doc’s wife, Tess, came up and led him away to one of the ambulances.

After taking another look around, he joined Luther’s troop and headed back to the prisoners, still sitting in the tank road. They had been given water and rations, after they had been patted down for weapons. Zach had asked Matt to speak with them about joining the caravan and moving west, cautioning him not to reveal their planned destination.

“What did they say?” Zach asked as he rode up.

“Most of them want to go back for their families, but there are eight who will join us. The rest want their weapons and some horses and supplies. They will join us later, when they can.”

“With the four wounded, that’s twelve. We lost three, so that makes a total of, what, thirty-one troopers?” Zach mused. “Listen up, those who want to go back will be given weapons, ammunition, supplies and one truck, along with horses. If you get your families away, head for Salt Lake City. We plan on establishing ourselves there. Tonight, you will remain under guard and the first thing tomorrow you will get your equipment and be released. You may return to your camp, but I caution you, don’t try to leave it.

“The eight who are joining us, you return to the camp and think it over. I don’t want someone who will change his mind on a whim. The same goes for you, tomorrow you will be given supplies and mounts.

“Luther, they are yours. We left shovels so they can bury their dead. Pile them in the gully and cave dirt in over them.” Zach abruptly turned his horse and followed the ambulances to the rest area.

Matt galloped up to Zach and asked, “Why not tell them where we are

going? If they do want to join us, how will they find us?"

"Matt, if any of them are captured, and it is likely they will be after the hornet's nest we broke open, I don't want them to be able to give our position away. I want you, and your squad, to follow them from a great distance. If they get away with this, then fine, bring them to Mitchell, if not, well, just come back."

When they arrived at the rest area, relieved faces gathered around. He was clapped on the back and his hand shook. He was thanked more times than he could count. He found Charlie and asked about the prisoners and was pointed to a side room in the information center. There were two sentries at the door. He crossed to the smaller room and entered to face a furious Mahdist, fastened to a metal stand. His right side and leg were heavily bandaged. The other two occupants were either sleeping or unconscious. A guard was seated in a chair.

Zach dismissed the guard and sat in his vacated chair. The two men stared at each other for a time and, finally, the Mahdist spoke, "Why am I tied like a miserable dog. Release me immediately."

"You are a dog, to me," Zach delivered the insult in a mild tone and it took a moment for the Mahdist to gain its full import.

A stream of invective spewed from the prisoner's mouth until Zach rose and casually backhanded him across the face. "Now, now, be civil," he said as he backed to his chair. "I want to ask you some questions."

"I will tell you nothing. I am a chosen of Allah and you will die a horrible death before the Mahdi is finished with you. Even now, a jihad is being prepared against you and your traitorous dogs."

"The Mahdi, I hear, has his own problems. Let's see, there is a revolt

in Illinois and another in Iowa. Those vowel states sure are troublesome. How is Indiana doing? The conquest of Chicago has hit some snags and, finally, of great importance to us, the Blake recruits have killed their officers, rescued their families and, just today, eliminated the new garrison. You, old son, have the distinction of being one of only three survivors still loyal to that pig calling himself the Mahdi.”

The man went ashen at this news and slumped back against the wall, wincing as he irritated his wounds. Then he became defiant and retorted, “We will never forget this insult or forgive. You will be sent to Satan and spend an eternity in agony. That is all I will say.”

Doc White came bursting in and demanded to know what was going on. The noise was disturbing his other patients. Zach apologized, arose and left, aware that getting information from this fanatic would be impossible.

Chapter 4

To the Mountains

Spring/Summer 2041

We got lucky. Whoever this Mahdi is, he needs to stop picking family to run his military. We got his uncle Achmed yesterday. Chewed him up good. We were lucky to get away with only 3 dead and 6 wounded. We did pick up some recruits, but I have a feeling that the ones going back to their families aren't going to make it. I hope they do, but there isn't anyone to steady them down. Matt would help, if he could. Matt's set of Janissaries were from one town, and an unimportant one, at that. These guys will need to hit several, larger towns. Good luck to them.

Doc wants to care for the Mahdist prisoners. There is going to be a fight about them. They must have overheard conversations about our destination, since the rest area has been scoured for any information of southern Wyoming. We can't let them go and we don't have any facilities to keep them prisoner. Doesn't leave us much choice.

The next morning, the Janissary infantry that had decided not to stay were given weapons, ammunition and supplies, along with an empty truck. The weapons were placed, empty, in the back of the truck, along with boxes of shells, and they were warned not to retrieve them until they were a half-day's journey to the east. After they set off, Matt and his troop followed them, at a distance.

The Committee met and questioned Doc on the condition of the patients. He stated that their wounded were able to travel, as well as two of the three captives, but the third prisoner was too badly injured to move for several days. Andy Scales and Mike Stewart reported that they had made a survey of the remaining truck and the two pickups. The truck was serviceable, but the pickups were a total loss.

“Zach pretty much trashed the first one with a high-powered bullet which pierced the radiator, destroyed the fan and cracked the block. The parts are of no use, since the only matching pickup was the other one and its engine was still running after it flipped and the engine had seized when the oil wasn’t being pumped. The tires will fit one of our pickups, but there isn’t much, outside the wheels, that are of any use,” Andy reported to the council.

“As to the machine guns, the one Zach shot is ruined, though we can salvage several parts, including the barrel, which we can use on the second machine gun, whose barrel is bent.

“We managed to salvage several gallons of fuel from the pickups and there were fifteen jerry cans of gas in the trucks.”

Curtis reported that they had managed to salvage sixty-odd rifles, three cases of ammunition and several hundred loose shells from the dead. Of the thirty horses, most had been turned over to the party that had just left, but seven had been added to their herd.

The council decided that Zach would take charge of their troops and weapons, and ammunition would be passed out to the rest of the caravan members. The trucks, pickups and wagons were reloaded with the additional supplies from the Mahdists and the water cans were filled with water. By noon, the caravan was ready to go and it was time for the wounded to be

loaded. Suddenly, three shots thundered from inside the information center and troopers hastily snatched up weapons and ran to the building.

Zach exited the building as they arrived and told them everything was fine. When asked about the shots, he informed them that he had taken care of the prisoners and there was no need to find space for them.

Doc raged at him, “You murdering bastard! You killed those men in cold blood! Who do you think you are? God?” He pushed past Zach to check on the three men.

“Zach, what did you do that for? They weren’t going to hurt anyone, they, well, we could have left them here, if you didn’t want to take them with us,” William said.

“Listen, William,” he started and raised his voice to include the whole crowd, “all of you, there wasn’t anything else to do. We couldn’t leave them here. Even with food and water they may never have been found. And if they were, how many of you talked about our plans when they could hear? At least one of them was a fanatic; he would have written where to find us in his own blood, if he had to. We don’t have the facility to keep them prisoner forever, either. After eating our food and learning all about us, they would certainly have escaped, somewhere along the way, maybe killing some of us in the process. And if they hadn’t escaped, what would we do with them, make them permanent prisoners or maybe slaves?

“Charlie, William, you want slavery back? Sandy? I don’t, myself.

“I just didn’t see any choice and I didn’t want anyone else to be responsible. Just me. So, go ahead. Do what you think is right, execute or exile me.”

Doc, who had stopped to listen to the last of Zach’s speech, pushed

past him and muttered that they were dead. He went to a wagon, grabbed a shovel and tossed it at Zach's feet and said, "You killed them, you bury them."

Zach picked up the shovel and circled to the rear of the information center and began to dig. Curtis, Will and several other troopers soon joined him and they all silently excavated the graves and buried the Mahdists. Nothing more was said of the incident, but Zach noticed that some were not as friendly with him as before.

Two of the new recruits were added to Luther and Gregory's troops, bringing them up to six total, to match Curtis' and Matt's numbers. The other six were incorporated into the caravan guard.

The caravan started rolling west; with Curtis' troop riding point and Gregory's troop split to ride the flanks. After studying his maps, Zach took Luther and his men and headed down the next road that crossed the freeway while the rest of the refugees continued along the main route. Zach's direction was south, away from Sidney, NE, which was a ruin in the distance. When Zach scanned the town, only an occasional chimney remained standing and the Cabela's water tower was a lonely beacon against the sky.

The route to the first farm led down a long lane, lined with poplars. The buildings showed signs of recent burning and the wild dogs had not found the three bodies sprawled in the drive, though buzzards rose in a black cloud at their approach. Zach ordered the troopers to spread out and search the area for signs of the attackers.

Eddie Burns found a track leading south that looked like it had been left recently.

Zach's map showed that another farm lay in that direction and asked

Luther what they should do. The troop leader said, “Well, what do you think we should do?”

Zach replied, “Luther, you are the leader of this troop. If you can’t make a decision, then you are not the right man for the job. Again, what do we do?”

Luther hesitated and said, “I think we should follow them and see how many there are and what direction they are heading. If south, then we, probably, should leave them to it, if they circle back north, well, we will have to, um, take that as it comes.” He looked at Zach for approval but received nothing in return.

Zach interrupted Luther as he was about to say something, “You made your decision, Luther, don’t every look to anyone for approval or disapproval. Just issue your orders to get it done.”

Luther nodded and ordered Eddie Burns to ride point and follow the tracks. The rest of the troopers were spread out in a skirmish line cross-wise to the trail. After an hour of travel, Eddie rode up to the base of a small hill and held up his hand. He slipped from the saddle and crept up the hill as the other troopers froze in place. When he had taken a long look over the hill, he backed down and returned to his mount, motioning them forward.

Eddie told them there were vehicles at the farm below the hill and that he saw several people on the porch and around the house. Zach and Luther scattered the troopers to form a perimeter and they climbed the hill and lay down behind some bushes. Zach took the scope from its pocket in the sniper rifle bag and handed his binoculars to Luther. They both scanned the layout below them. After a careful study, they edged back below the slope and planned strategy.

“What do you want to do, Luther?” Zach queried.

Luther took a deep breath and another quick glance at the farm.

“There are two pickups and four motorcycles. That means, at least, six reavers. It could be twelve or, even, twenty, but I would put it at between eight and twelve. That means we face two-to-one odds or worse. A quick charge and we could surprise them?”

Zach shakes his head. “Luther, how much ground would we have to cross? I saw five outside, on the porch and around the vehicles, so that means there are three to five fortified up. A cavalry charge against a fortification, well, what do you think?”

Luther angrily shook his head and said, “Zach, you had better take over. I just don’t seem to get it.”

“Luther, they didn’t train you to command. We selected you to be in charge of this troop. Quit whining and do it. Just think logically. Take a deep breath, get back on the ridge and figure out how to attack the farmhouse without getting slaughtered. Or, tell us to pack it up and get out.”

The troop commander gave Zach a resentful look then crawled up to the crest of the hill and began scanning the terrain. He slid down the hill again and picked up a twig, smoothed a patch of bare ground and drew a quick diagram.

“This is the farmhouse,” he said, pointing to a crudely drawn square. “We are here, along this ridge. There is a neck of woods behind the house, here. We know that there are two people on the porch; the rest went into the house.

“I figure to send three of our troopers to the neck of the woods. We can see a big stump, about here. We use hand signals to get information from

the three in the woods about the back of the house. If the answers are satisfactory, we wait until just before dusk. Zach, you hit the two on the porch with the sniper rifle after the rest of us reach the trucks. There is a swale and brush at the foot of the hill, which will let us get close without being seen.”

Zach looked at the diagram and saw that it was an accurate depiction of the terrain. He nodded and asked, “What are the questions?”

“One,” Luther ticked off one finger, “are there any guards at the back of the house or at the back windows? Two, is there a back door? Three, can they see anyone in the house? Raising the left arm means ‘no’, the right means ‘yes’, crossing the arms above the head means ‘call off the attack, we will rejoin you.’”

Zach looked at Luther and said, “Well, let’s get the rest of the boys together and you can deal out assignments.”

After the plan had been explained, Tim Scales, John DeLeon and Eddie Burns began their circling movement to the woods behind the house. Zach unpacked his sniper rifle and wiped and reloaded the shells into the magazine. He activated the laser sight, positioned himself on the crest of the hill and dry fired at the two occupants of the front porch.

Luther joined him, after checking that Peter Gonzales and Jacob Swan were ready, and trained his binoculars on the large stump. Ten minutes later, he spotted Tim in front of the stump. Tim raised his left arm, dropped it to indicate no guards in the rear; he lifted his right arm, dropped it to show that there was a back door; and lifted it again, meaning that there was no one in sight at the back of the house..

“All right, let’s go,” Luther said and slithered over the hill, followed

by Peter and Jacob. Zach carefully wiped off the lense of his scope and sighted his weapon on the porch. One of them, by the far end, was tipped back in his chair, his straw cowboy hat over his eyes. The other was smoking a cigar and staring out over the rolling landscape.

Zach waited until Luther had reached a point near the trucks and fired twice, in quick succession, piercing the cowboy hat and dropping the man behind it to the porch floor. He swung his sights to the other man who was turning with a grin on his face. He evidently thought that the other had put too much pressure on the chair causing the legs to slide out from under him. He sobered when he saw the two dark holes in the man's face and the fixed, staring eyes. Before he could react, Zach had fired, striking him in the throat and flinging him backwards over the railing. As he started to rise, blood pouring from his neck, Zach fired a second shot and drilled him through the temples.

With a final move, Zach swung the rifle and took aim at the stump. He scattered bark with his shot, the signal to Tim to rush the back of the house. As Zach stuffed the sniper rifle in its bag and picked up his carbine, Luther and his men were sprinting towards the front door. Peter kicked the door open and darted into the house, closely followed by Luther and Jacob.

Zach stumbled in his rush down the hill and barely saved himself from falling as he hit the flat area at the bottom of the hill. There were several shots, silence and another volley from the house. He had to make a desperate leap to clear the swale, but he managed to keep his feet and reach the house, out of breath. As he started up the steps, he heard the roar of a shotgun and the return bark of the semi-automatic M-21 with which the boys were equipped.

He made a final leap to the door and sprang inside, carbine leveled. He saw the crumpled form of Peter at the foot of the stairs and a figure rushing at him from a doorway across the living room, raising an axe over its head. Zach fired three quick shots and the .30 caliber bullets slammed the figure back. It bounced off the wall and fell, the axe clattering to the floor. He raised his gun to cover the stairs when he heard the rush of footsteps.

Luther sprang to the landing and covered the room and Zach shouted at him. Another rush of steps from the back of the house brought Tim, Eddie and John into the living room. Everyone froze at the same moment and it was obvious that any movement could have triggered a bloodbath.

“Anyone else hurt?” asked Zach, after a second. The others let out an audible sigh and shook themselves as if from a dream. Luther called up the stairs to Jacob and they slowly gathered around Peter’s body. He had caught the full blast of the shotgun in his face and chest, dying instantly.

“We got him,” Jacob said, his voice choked with emotion.

“There were three others in the kitchen,” Tim said. “I think they were drunk or something. They just sat there and let us shoot them.”

Zach walked over to the body of the person he had shot and turned it over with the toe of his boot. The slugs had mangled its chest, but it was obviously a woman. Her hair was hacked short, but features were feminine. Zach pulled a cloth off a lamp table and covered her face and turned back to the troopers.

Before he could speak, they heard sobbing coming from the room out of which the woman had charged. Zach flattened himself against the wall by the door, realizing that most calibers could fire through the wall. The rest crouched in defensive positions.

“You in there,” Zach called out. “Toss out your weapons and come out with your hands raised.”

The sobs stopped and a scream, quickly muffled, erupted. “Wait, don’t shoot. We can’t come out. We’re tied up. Please, don’t shoot.”

Zach, hating the situation and smelling a trap, whispered to Eddie to get a flashlight from his saddlebags. The crying continued from the room while Eddie was gone, irritating Zach and setting his nerves on edge.

When Eddie returned with the light, Zach crouched down and, raising his arm, shone the flashlight around the room, eliciting a startled cry from within. When nothing happened, he ducked his head around the doorjamb and pulled it back. He had a glimpse of a small room with mattresses scattered on the floor and a huddle of figures in the far corner. Signaling to the others to be ready, Zach edged himself to his feet, easing his cramped knees. Taking a deep breath, he spun into the room and directed the light on the forms, seeing five half-dressed figures.

He stepped across the room and threw open the heavy, brocade curtains, letting in the last light of the Westering sun. The figures were all women, their hair lank and greasy, and the room had a feral odor about it, mixed with sweat and unwashed clothes. The women’s faces were clean only where tears had trickled down their cheeks. They were chained to heavy spikes driven into the wooden floors.

Zach called out, “Luther, look for a set of keys. They might be on the female I killed or one of the other bodies. Tim, get some blankets and see if the plumbing is working in this place.”

“I’m Zach,” he told the women. “We aren’t going to hurt you. Who are you, anyway?”

A dark-haired woman replied, "I'm Alice Sanders, this is Jane Washington, Amanda Wilkins, Carla Rangel and Constance Waylans." She pointed to a small, fair woman with large blue eyes and pointed features, a thin girl with ebon hair and a small scar on her chin, a large young woman with thin lips and a button nose and a young girl with auburn hair and a frightened demeanor.

"These pigs raided my farm three weeks ago, a couple of hundred miles southeast of here and took me with them. They killed my husband," Alice finished with a choking sob.

Zach put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder and said, "That's okay. You don't have to talk about it." Crying women made Zach nervous. He was relieved when Tim came back with an armful of blankets. They distributed them to the women, which, at least, made up for their scanty clothing.

Alice tossed her head and wiped her eyes. She continued, "Amanda was taken from her parents place a couple of days later, just over the Nebraska line. At least her father got one of them before they fired the house. We don't know if they got away or not. Jane and Carla were on a farm near here. The bastards killed their folks. Constance was on this farm when we got here yesterday. She was alone, says her folks died of the flu months ago and she didn't know where else to go.

"These animals would raid a place, stay there for a week or two and move on. We were always tied up. They talked about trading us when they met another gang of reavers. They, they used us when they wanted. The bitch, Betty, was the worst. She was always slapping and hitting us. I think she was crazy and the men were afraid of her. There were times she kept them away from us and once or twice, Kurt, their leader, talked of shooting

her.

“They had a lot of stuff in the pickups that they said were trade goods. Apparently, there is a place; they called it a rendezvous, where these gangs meet and trade. There was some talk of taking a town and setting up a permanent camp and joining the gangs together in some kind of cooperative group and raiding on a larger scale. They are afraid of the Mahdists and the Fundamentalists. That’s about all I know.”

As Zach was telling them about the escape from the Mahdists and their plans to settle in the West, Luther came in with a ring of keys. They released the women and Eddie showed up with news that there was hot water. Wrapped in their blankets, the women went upstairs to bathe and dress in clean clothes.

Meanwhile, Zach had Luther, Tim, Eddie and John moved the bodies of the reavers a hundred yards from the buildings. He and Jacob found shovels and dug a grave for Peter. By the time they were done digging, the women had finished their baths and came down transformed. Constance was able to provide them with clothes that were a fair fit from her own closet and her mother’s.

They all gathered around Peter’s grave and Zach conducted a brief ceremony before they all returned to the house to plan their next move.

Zach started by saying, “Ladies, you have two choices, as I see it. You can join us or you can go your own way. Should you decide to join us, we will load the pickups with as much as we can use and head out tomorrow morning. If you stay, we will leave you the pickups and contents, the weapons and we won’t salvage anything from this farm.”

Alice looked around at the others and replied, “I am willing to join

you, and so are the others, but Amanda wants to find out what happened to her parents. Could we go back to her place and see?"

Zach looked uncomfortable. "From what you have told me, her folks are a hundred miles or so to the southeast. That's a two-, three-day trip each way and we can't be gone from the caravan for that long.

"Amanda, if you insist on going back, I won't stop you, but I can't send anyone along with you. You can have one of the pickups and whatever supplies you need. When you find out what you can, take I-80 west. We will have patrols out and we will find you. I won't give you anything more specific. I don't want to scare you, but I don't want our exact information to fall into other hands, if you get captured. I hope you understand."

As Luther started to interrupt, Zach gave him a stern look and a shake of his head.

Amanda bit her lip and nodded.

Zach turned to the others and asked, "Anyone else want to stay?"

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

Constance cleared her throat and looked nervously at Zach. He encouraged her to speak her mind and waited until she mustered up her courage and asked, "You won't burn it, will you?"

Zach looked puzzled and returned with, "Burn what?"

"The house and, and the barns and all. You won't burn them, will you?" Constance answered and a slow tear traced a shining line down her left cheek. "I mean, you don't need it, but I don't want it burned, like the others were going to do."

Zach smiled encouragingly at her and said, "No, we don't burn, unless it is absolutely necessary. Don't worry." He turned to the rest of them

and asked, “Now, anymore questions? Yes, Constance, what else?”

“Um, can I take some of my things with me?”

“We will go through the stuff in the trucks and weed out what is useless to the community and we will make sure that there will be a trunk for personal things. For each of you, if there is something you want. Constance, are there any trunks in the house? Good,” he said when she nodded, “you can take your pick and the rest of you can claim one each and pack what you want. Find another one for general stuff and necessities, like tooth brushes, soap, and, um, well you know, women’s things.”

Alice and Carla laughed at his obvious embarrassment.

“Anyway,” he continued, “tomorrow morning we leave by 10 a.m., so get started with the packing. Eddie, you, Jake and John get the trunks and cases from the attic and go through the kitchen and pack pots, pans, utensils and such. If you can find newspaper, wrap any glassware and dishes, but keep them separate, in case there isn’t enough room.

“Tim, Luther, come with me. We’ll start going through the trucks and see what can be sorted out.”

Outside, by the truck, Luther turned on Zach, “We can’t let Amanda go off by herself, Zach. She’ll get taken again or killed or something.” Tim nodded in agreement and added his voice to back up his friend.

“What do you suggest, boys?”

“We go with her, of course. It will only take a few days. What’s the harm? I just don’t feel right about letting her go,” he finished lamely.

“Luther, on that hill, I told you that you have to make decisions after you look over the terrain and think about what needs to be done and how. You are still responsible for your troopers and, now, four women who have

had a rough time. This isn't the only gang of reavers out there. You heard Alice. They are talking about setting up a stronghold. They hold rendezvous. That means there are, probably, a series of gangs roaming the countryside, looting and raping and killing.

“With the trucks, horses and women, we would make a tempting target and we would have our butts hanging out there. With horses we can cross country, but the trucks and motorcycles will mean we have to stay on the roads. Those vehicles aren't quiet, either. We will be heard a long way off. There aren't enough horses to carry everyone. Do you want to leave Alice and the rest here while we go gallivanting off with Amanda? How about splitting our forces and having two weakened groups?

“What you are proposing is putting twelve people in danger for the sake of one.”

Luther and Tim exchanged glances. Tim shrugged. “Well, I still don't like it. We could force her to come with us.”

“Do we have that right? Are we going to turn into Mahdists? Make rules to force people to do what we want, even for their own good?” asked Zach.

Luther turned to the first truck without answering and began tearing at the bungee cords that held the tarp over the load. When Tim started towards him, Zach grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the other truck, telling him to let Luther have some space.

They spread the tarps out and unloaded the jumbled items from the trucks. The useful ones were put on one tarp and the useless items were stacked on the other. By the time Eddie, Jacob and John joined them, they had completed the first sort. One tarp held cases of food, weapons, clothes,

boots, ammunition, kitchen supplies and miscellaneous camping gear. The other was stacked with liquor and loot, such as silver candlesticks, salvers, platters, silverware and other assorted gewgaws. Zach moved the liquor to the first tarp, indicating that it was were considered ‘medical supplies’ and would be given to Doc. After some hesitation, he ordered the loot buried near the road, where it would be easily found, if they ever came back this way.

Zach ordered the fuel removed from the motorcycles and used to fill the tank of the trucks. He found it ironic that, after the push to build hybrid cars, the electricity plants failed and they were back to using gas, though there were solar panels on each house for personal use. It took several days to recharge a vehicle battery while living only on the electricity generated by the panels. Jacob and John found several plastic and metal gas-cans, which were used to hold what remained of the fuel. The supplies were split between the trucks, a mute reminder that Amanda would be leaving them.

After dinner, the men carried out the boxes from the kitchen, including the glass and dishware. Enough camping equipment and food were loaded into Amanda’s truck to see her through her trip and, hopefully, to the west.

Luther set up a guard rotation and they turned in.

The next morning dawned clear and bright and it promised to be a warm day. There was a tearful good-by as Amanda drove away.

The troopers formed a wide ring of outriders and Alice, Jane and Constance rode in the truck. Carla rode Peter’s horse and stayed close to the truck with Zach. Their trip was uneventful for the three days it took them to catch up with the caravan. The refugees welcomed the newcomers with open arms and the weapons and supplies were distributed as needed.

The council met that evening and Luther reported on the past few

days. After he was dismissed, Zach stepped up, saying that Luther needed a guiding hand, but that he was coming around.

“I’m concerned about the other troops. There was a time or two where Luther didn’t show the best judgment and it wouldn’t have taken much to get his troop wiped out. I suggest that we send an adult, well, these kids are adults after the last few weeks, so let’s say, older person, with each troop.

“Not only will it give the troops a mature hand, it would also give them one more gun.”

It was agreed upon by the council and they broke up the meeting after telling Zach that things had been quiet, but Matt hadn’t returned and nothing had been heard from him. Zach was concerned about the situation, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He went off to find Luther and pick out another trooper to replace Peter Gonzalez and get supplies ready for the next day. They would push on and take another road to the south. Zach’s map showed several farms and dwellings in that direction. Since they couldn’t guarantee that they would find carts or trucks at every stop, they decided to take a small wagon. It was loaded with supplies and the new trooper drove it with his mount tied to the rear.

It was a muggy day, with clouds piling up to the west. It looked like they would be in for a storm. The caravan pulled out late that day, owing to problems with one of the trucks. A spitting rain began to fall by the time they were lined out. Luther passed by Curtis’ screen of troopers and disappeared in the curtain of rain. By the time they came to the road they had planned on following south, the rain was torrential and they made a miserable camp in a grove of trees a couple of miles from the junction. They couldn’t get a fire

started with the wet wood so they huddled together under a brush shelter and ate cold rations.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the rain had slackened and Luther ordered his men to mount up. They hoped to reach the first buildings by nightfall and spend the night under a roof. Their hopes were dashed when the first farm proved to be a ruin. The destruction was, at least, several months old and only a corner of the barn was standing. They made camp and were able to get a fire going to heat some food and make coffee. The warmth did raise their spirits and, soon, steaming blankets and clothes were hanging on ropes stretched close to the fire.

The only excitement occurred when Zach noticed that one of the troopers, Eddie, was sitting tenderly during the meal. Upon persistent questioning, he learned that Eddie had a blister on his butt. It took all of the others to hold him down while Zach lanced it, to the boy's howls of pain. The final straw was the splash of medicinal vodka on the open wound. Eddie gasped and groaned.

Eddie was assigned the job of driving the wagon the next day and endured some good-natured ribbing and the offers of pillows and down comforters, none of which they possessed. The sun came out and the land steamed as they made their way to the next farm. They split into two groups when they came in sight of the farm road. Tim Scales took his men and swung wide to come up on the buildings at the rear. Zach, Luther and the other two troopers spread out in a skirmish line, walking their horses, and approached along the drive.

The buildings were still standing, but Zach hesitated and asked Luther, "What do you think?"

Luther took his time about replying. Taking his glasses out, he scanned the buildings and the woods nearby. “There’s something, I just can’t put my finger on it.” He mused for a few more seconds and scanned the buildings again. “Wait. There’s a trace of smoke coming out of the chimney.”

“Good job, old son. So, now, what do we do?” asked Zach.

“We should give Tim some more time to give the back a going over. There is a spot back of the barn where we can see him and he can signal.

“I was thinking,” he continued, turning to Zach. “I don’t see any trucks or motorcycles. Do you think they saw us and are hiding them for a trap or are they just the farmers who live there?”

“It’s hard to tell, Luther. We are probably going to have to go on in unless Tim sees something.”

They waited, keeping a lookout on the spot at which they expected Tim to show. Finally, they saw movement and Luther focused his glasses on Tim. He signaled that there was no evidence of anything amiss at the back of the house. Zach mounted his horse and made a show of giving Luther his rifle and gun belt. He rode up the drive and to the front of the house with his hands raised. By the time he pulled up to the foot of the porch steps sweat was trickling down his spine and not from the heat.

The front door opened a crack and the barrel of a shotgun inched out. “What do you want?” came the disembodied question.

As Zach started to dismount, the voice cautioned him to stay where he was and he settled back in the saddle. He slowly lowered his hands to the saddle horn and said, “We are from a group of folks heading west. Most are escaping from the Mahdists and there are about a hundred of us and we have

been scouting the towns and farms for anyone who would like to join us.”

A dry chuckle greeted his words. “And if nobody is home, then you help yourself to whatever is laying around, is that it?”

“That’s true, but if there are folk living there, we just ask them to come along or not, but we don’t take anything that isn’t offered, in that case. Now, if you want to join us, fine. If not, fine. You stay here and we go away.

“Now, I’m getting a little tired of sitting here in the sun, so I’ll bid you good bye and be on my way,” Zach finished and nudged his horse into motion.

“Wait a minute, there. You haven’t given us much to go on. You’re asking us to join you, but you’ve not said where you’re going. Light and set, so’s we can discuss the proposition.” With that, the door opened and a heavy-set man with a long beard and his hair braided stepped out of the house, waving off a hand that grabbed his arm. He was dressed in a long-tailed flannel shirt over jeans and work boots. A “John Deere” cap sat on his head and a smoldering cigar was sticking out of the left side of him small mouth. “The name is Schummer, TJ Schummer, Theodore to my wife when she is in a mood. Get on down and we can sit on the porch here.”

“Zach Banducci, here,” Zach said, dismounting and extending his hand. TJ’s grip was firm and his hands felt of calluses from a lifetime of hard work.

They sat on the porch and Zach told the man their story. When he was finished, TJ had smoked the cigar down to a nub, which he carefully put out and placed it in his shirt pocket saying, “When I run out of smokes, I’ll take all of the cigar ends and chop them up for pipe tobacco.

“You sound like you have had a pretty interesting time of it. We have

had our own interesting times. A gang of hoods came through here a couple three months ago and raided the Simmons farm up the road. Luckily, he heard the bastards coming and lit out for here. They burned the place down, probably 'cause they were pissed that Pastor Simmons didn't have anything worth stealing.

"Afterwards, they came down here. We let them ride their motorcycles into the yard. There were six of them and not a brain amongst them. They came right up, not like you, without a care in the world. As they climbed the stairs in a bunch, my wife, Mary and my kids, Penny and Sam opened up with shotguns. You can see where the porch supports and railings are tore up some.

"Yes sir, they laid most of them out with the first volley. One managed to get to his bike, but I was able to nail him before he got the kickstand up. Two of the bikes had small touring trailers and they were full of loot.

"Simmons, having nowhere to go and my wife being kinder than she should be, offered him lodgings here, along with the Mills couple. There are eight of us and we have been talking about moving on and finding a more defensible place. The only problem is my herd. I would hate to leave them, but we couldn't keep watch and look after them, too."

Zach asked, "Herd? We didn't see one when we came up."

"Llamas, Zach. Sixteen of the finest animals you have ever seen. We keep them in the barn because of the packs of feral dogs. Too bad the flu didn't affect them."

TJ pointed out a spot where Zach could camp while he talked their proposition over with the others. They shook hands and TJ edged through the

door, closing it firmly after him. Zach signaled Tim and Luther to meet him and he rode towards the trees where he had been told he could camp.

He explained the situation to the troopers and assigned two of them to guard the approaches to the camp, while the rest gathered wood and built a small fire to cook their noon meal. Towards mid-afternoon, Zach started pacing while the off-duty troopers followed the old military adage and slept. Finally, he strode up to the house and, as he was about to knock, the door opened and TJ invited him in. He was sporting a belt around his ample middle with two pistols, the handle of the one on the right pointing back and the one on the left reversed. He was carrying a pump shotgun and it looked like a toy in his massive fist.

“Sorry to have kept you, but it took a while to reach a consensus,” he said as he led Zach into the kitchen. A massive oak table dominated the large room. Seated around the table were six adults. One of the women had a young boy on her lap. Schummer introduced them. Pastor Simmons, a stiff-necked man of around fifty, with a scruffy beard that he continually brushed with his fingers, gave a short nod. Zach just knew that he was going to have trouble with him.

A young couple was introduced as the Mills, Tim and Mary. Their farm was the third on Zach’s list, but it had been burned several weeks earlier, after which they had moved in with the Schummers.

The others at the table were TJ’s family, his wife, Mary, holding the youngest boy, John, and were flanked by their twins, son, Sam, and daughter, Penny. The older children both had weapons leaning against the table in easy reach. Zach noticed that the Mills and the Pastor were empty handed.

“Mister, we have had a long and tiring discussion,” TJ said, tossing a

look at the Pastor. “We have decided to take you up on your offer. We figure that we can’t hold off the reavers forever and there is safety in numbers. The Pastor and the Mills don’t have much to pack, seein’ as how they had to run, but we have a lot of stuff to move. Not only home stuff, but also other things like the equipment needed to work with the llama wool; carders, spinning wheels, looms and what not.

“There are the llamas in the barn and a couple of wagons and four mules. We used to have a truck and a tractor, but we sold them when the bad times started. I figure that it will take us a day to get everything packed and ready to go. Sam and I will introduce your boys to the llamas.”

Sam grinned, showing his first animation yet. Zach feared that it was going to take more than a pat on the head to be ‘introduced’ to the llamas.

“They spit,” Penny said.

“Wonderful,” Zach returned, sarcastically. “Any other questions?”

Pastor Simmons stood, adopted a dramatic pose and asked, “Do you believe in God?”

Zach looked stunned and replied, “I’m sorry?”

“I asked if you believed in God, the Almighty.”

“Pastor, despite the state of the world and the things that have happened over the past few years, the answer is yes, I believe in God.”

“Do you follow the ten commandments?”

“As well as anyone, Pastor, as well as anyone.”

“Including the sixth commandment?”

“Yes, Pastor,” replied Zach, starting to lose patience.

“Aha, but you have admitted to killing. Brother Schummer said so. Was he lying?”

“I am not sure what one has to do with the other, Pastor. Both Exodus and Deuteronomy list the sixth commandment as ‘Thou shalt not commit murder’, though the Hebrew translation is closer to ‘Thou shalt not commit unlawful murder’. Exasperated, Zach went on, “Pastor, with all due respect, I don’t propose to discuss my sins here. And, if you will excuse me, you aren’t MY pastor.”

As Zach turned towards the door, he saw the grins on the Schummer faces, the shock on the Mills’ and the fury painted on the Pastor’s visage. Zach whistled as he descended the steps, ‘The Saints Go Marching In’ by The Kingston Trio, a tune he hadn’t thought of in years.

Zach returned to camp and told Luther and Tim what was going on and asked them for their input. Luther was taking his time, now, to study a situation as it arose and he finally said that the men would pull the wagons out of the shed to the house, one at the front door and one at the back. They would spend what was left of the day to load as much as possible.

When Zach asked him about guards, Luther assigned Tim and another trooper to make a circuit of the grounds. This would be part of a rotation for all the troopers.

The following morning, after breaking their fast, the troopers were ‘introduced’ to the llamas. The bad-tempered animals charged and spat at several, while others were able to pet them with impunity. There was good-natured joking about how bad the members of the first group smelled, which was returned by comments about how the second group smelled like a llama. By the time they were ready to move out, the troopers had been divided into two groups to rotate between guard duty and llama herding. Sam and Penny Schummer insisted on joining the troopers and they were assigned to Tim

Scales' group.

The outriders were sent at mid-morning and the wagons and herd was moved out shortly after. The dogs were able to keep the animals in line with a little help from the Schummers and the assigned troopers. Tim Mills and Pastor Simmons drove the two wagons loaded with supplies and family goods in one and equipment in the other. Pastor Simmons said a lengthy prayer to 'bless the endeavor and keep them safe from heathens and the evils of the world.' As he droned on, Zach waited for a pause, shouted "Amen" and ordered the troopers to mount. Zach smiled at the look of fury on the Pastor's face and mused that he was doomed to have trouble with him.

When they caught up to the caravan, the llamas caused a stir, bringing excitement to the monotonous journey. The llamas were kept well away from the rest of the cattle and horses. The two dogs were able to keep the herd moving and in order. Zach thought of the Israelites crossing the desert with their "herds and flocks".

The caravan had come across a mixed herd of cattle and buffalo. They managed to capture several cows, which looked to be Jersey or Guernsey mix. Six other animals were killed and the hides stripped off. The meat was welcome and the council decided to make camp for a few days. There was plenty of wood and water and the stopover gave them time to smoke the meat, rest the animals and wash themselves and their clothes. When Zach rode up, the trees were festooned with drying laundry and the air redolent of wood smoke and roasting meat.

Over a dinner of roast buffalo and canned vegetables, Zach commented to William that their progress was a lot slower than he had hoped. There was a danger that they wouldn't get to Mitchell until late

summer and would have to live off existing supplies until they were able to harvest the following fall. William argued that they needed the rest to repair some of the wagons and wash the dust out of their clothes.

Some of the boys laid out a baseball diamond and organized a pick-up game. A honey tree was found at the southern end of the woods and they managed to use smoke to calm the bees and raid the comb, though, not without a few stings for their pains.

Pastor Simmons, with the aid of the Mills, was busy proselytizing to a disinterested audience. The members of the caravan had had enough of religion under the Mahdists, though a few attended the interminable daily worship service.

The council heard from Andy Scales and Mike Stewart that one of the trucks was on its last legs with a leaking radiator, and that fuel was getting low, even with the supply that Zach had found at the Waylan farm and other troops had discovered at abandoned farms and ranches. They estimated that they had three more days' supply before they would have to start abandoning the motorized vehicles.

Alvin Smith and William Smith were assigned the task of trying to get the cows to carry packs. When TJ heard of this, he pulled packs from his equipment wagon and showed them how his llamas were trained to carry loads, but that they would have to be led on a pack line, rather than herded. Supplies from the broken down truck were packed on the llamas and the fuel was distributed among the remaining vehicles.

On the day before the caravan was scheduled to restart the trek, Matt and his troop rode in. They were famished, having run out of supplies the day before. After a meal, Matt reported to the council and the collected families.

“We followed the infantry from the overpass fight for a couple of days until they came to a small town, which they bypassed in the night. We camped, to wait for them to return. There was a garrison of soldiers in the town. Gary Christensen followed the infantry around the town. Gary, you report on what you saw.”

Gary stepped up and clasped his hands behind his back. “They went past the first town, like Matt said, and, when they got to the next town, they waited until dark and snuck in. They must have been found out, ‘cause there was a lot of shooting. At dawn, there was a line of cars and trucks heading west, back to the first town. When they got there, they attacked and drove out or killed the Mahdists. They spent a day loading up more trucks and wagons.

“They left and headed west and we kept pace with them. It looked like they were going to get away and Matt decided to join them when they camped that next evening. However, during the second day, a company of Mahdists cavalry showed up. There was a fight, but the Mahdists way outnumbered the boys that went back, even with the men they added at the two towns.

“After the fight, the Mahdists, uh, raped the women in front of the men and children. They tortured the soldiers. Then they killed the children, then the women and, finally, the men. There wasn’t anything we could do for them, though we wanted to. It was pretty horrible,” he finished.

There was a stunned silence at this news. Though they hadn’t known them, they shared a common cause and it could just as easily have been they who had been tracked down and killed. A somber mood settled over the members of the caravan and most quietly sought their beds.

The council stayed in session and, after thanking Matt and Gary and

dismissing them, discussed the ramifications of the news. Zach proposed setting up a screen of troopers to the east of the caravan and to curtail the inspection of farms and buildings, other than those visible from the freeway.

William agreed and insisted that they make as fast a progress as possible, even to abandoning vehicles that ran out of fuel or broke down. He also insisted that Zach and half a troop ride ahead and scout out Mitchell to see if it was a viable destination or if it was already occupied.

Zach decided to let Luther's and Matt's troops rest. He took half of Curtis Dodge's troop, consisting of Nils Beckstrom, Carlos DeLeon and Paul Washington, when he left the next morning. Each trooper took an extra horse and six days rations when they galloped out ahead of the caravan.

The council hurried the caravan on the next morning after throwing Gregory LaTour's troop and the remainder of Curtis' troop to the east. Each member of the caravan was issued a weapon and ammunition, except Pastor Simmons who refused to carry a weapon.

Penny Schummer was incensed when she was told that she couldn't ride with Luther's troop and her father took her aside when she raged at the council as being unfair. She quickly calmed down under her father's words and soon after recruited a group of girls and formed a troop of her own.

Luther and Matt aligned their troops to provide flankers and a point for the caravan. By the time they were finished, a ring of troopers surrounded the families. The troopers assigned to what was called the mechanized troop, under Andy Scales and Mike Stuart, were assigned to guard the caravan, since there were not enough mounts for them.

The mountains, which had been smudges on the horizon, grew with each passing day, until they formed a wall in front of them. After two

stressful days of looking back over their shoulders, Zach met the caravan. He reported that Mitchell was a day ahead, around the mountains in front of them and it was abandoned by the living.

Chapter 5

New Home

Summer 2041

I hate reavers! They are animals and should be treated as mad dogs. They roam around in small groups feeding off those who are trying to rebuild. Raping and Murdering dogs. Some of the sights I saw traveling up from Atlanta were sickening. All of the base lusts in man have been released with no law to curb them. Child molesters, rapists, perverts of many kinds, sick people with sick minds. I am glad to kill them when and where I find them. The women look to be able to recover, but the girl needs a lot of support.

There are some good leaders growing in the group. Luther, after a rough start is looking strong. Tim Scales is a good leader, but not too strong on innovation. Gregory LaTour doesn't want to be a troop leader and has asked to be relieved. His heart isn't in it.

Penny, with her girl troop is a handful. She may be right, though; this rebuilding requires a full effort by everyone. If there are girls that want to fight, then I won't oppose the idea. The other side of the coin is that a new beginning will require a lot of children and we need to protect our women. Hopefully, we can work something out that won't result in something like Lysistrata's revolt. Not that I have to worry about it at my age.

Matt's news is bad. He was only able to watch in frustration. Tough on him, but he showed good sense in not interfering. He will make a good

commander.

William is taking to the task of command like he was born to it. I think that William will make a fine overall commander, but he needs to have faith in himself and learn that casualties happen. Doc is still sore about the killing of the prisoners at the rest stop. All of them have to realize that we are no longer civilized; we are back to a tribal culture. Like the Apache of the old Southwest, our word for stranger will have to be synonymous with enemy. We don't have jails, courts, prisons, rehabilitation programs in these times. We can't let valuable resources go to prisoners and I don't want to bring back slavery!

The big fly in the ointment is Pastor Simmons. He seems to want to set up a theocracy, with him as Pope. He is not having much success, thankfully, since the people are sick and tired of having religion shoved down their throats. I have to find another word other than 'people' for these, well, people. They need an identity. I will have to talk to the Council about this. Americans won't work, nor will Wyomers, or whatever the citizens called themselves, nor anything else I can think of.

At least I will be rid of them now that we have reached Mitchell.

The weary travelers welcomed the turnoff to the valley like it was a road to paradise. They were sick and tired of traveling, after a month on the road, with the constant wind, blowing dust and sudden cold snaps, sapping their vitality.

The entrance to the valley consisted of a wide mouth, between two peaks, which narrowed between sloping walls. Along the eastern side of the opening, a small river flowed to lose itself to the east. The entrance opened up to a pasture of a hundred or so acres. A weed-grown road split the valley

and climbed a slope at the southern end to another, slightly smaller valley, where the town of Mitchell sat on a bench at the foot of a large peak.

An old ranch stood on the western side of the main valley. The buildings formed a rough, squared off 'U', with the ranch house at the base, against the peak behind it. A barn on one side and a bunkhouse and ancillary buildings on the other flanked the house. The hard-packed yard sported a few weeds and some patches of hardy buffalo grass. The house had been kept in repair and was the final site of the drama that played out here. Three bodies had been found in the main room of the cabin. It appeared that all had succumbed to the deadly flu. Zach and his half-troop had buried them in a small cove to one side and covered the grave with rocks to keep out predators.

The llamas, cattle and wagons came through the pass first, knocking down the brush and dry grass to stop the motor vehicles from igniting them. Zach sat to one side, watching the animals spread out in the belly deep grass, just starting to cure on the stem. He called out to William to keep the caravan to this valley. They will camp here tonight and tomorrow the town will be swept before letting anyone in.

He assembled the leaders of the troops. He ordered Luther to take his troop and be on the lookout for the feral dogs that he and his troopers had seen on their earlier scout, especially in the trees along the river. The dogs hadn't attacked them, but they would be a danger to an isolated man, woman or child. He called Matt over and had him take his troop and make a sweep a couple of miles around the valley entrance, paying close attention to the wooded hill at the turnoff to the valley. Curtis was ordered to take one of the machine guns and set up a post to sweep the length of the entrance. Andy's job was to take the trucks and the caravan guards and block the southern end

of the road and keep anyone from entering the town until after the sweep.

They nodded and went to collect their troops and carry out the orders. Zach kept Sam Schummer with him, waiting for the boy's parents.

Zach stopped TJ and indicated the house. "I figured that you and your family could use the house as headquarters. You have the most experience with llamas and that makes you the head herder for the horses, cattle and whatever else we manage to 'domesticate'. We will put a regular rotation of troopers in the bunkhouse. I asked Mary if she would need extra help with the cooking and cleaning, but she just laughed and said she would let the Council know.

"We don't want her to overwork herself. Keep an eye on her and let us know and we will get her some help."

"Zach, you have to know Mary. She is happiest when she is feeding someone, the more the merrier." He slapped his ample belly to emphasize his point. "You just provide the food and my Mary will do the rest.

"I figure on putting in a truck garden in that large cove there," he pointed to a wide cut in the hillside. "We can rig up a fence to keep the critters out and I see there is a small stream from there leading to the water trough. We will make sure that the llamas are downstream, so's not to foul the water."

He turned his attention to Gregory LaTour and told him to have his troop clean out the bunkhouse and get it ready for occupation. Zach told him that Mary would do the cooking and washing up, along with the laundry, but the troopers would be responsible for keeping the bunkhouse and equipment sheds in order. They would also be responsible for helping with the garden, in addition to keeping an eye on the animals. There were tools in the barn and

sheds.

“We’ll send over mattresses, sheets, pillows and blankets this afternoon. Tomorrow, we will get you some help to fence off the opening and the garden’s cove,” Zach said pointing the areas out. “We shouldn’t have any problem with the animals; there is plenty of grass and water.”

He left Gregory to handle the situation and rode over to where the Council was having its hands full with disgruntled people who wanted to push on to Mitchell and a chance to sleep with roofs over their heads. William finally managed to get them to understand that the town wasn’t necessarily safe and that it would have to be swept to make sure that there weren’t any reavers, wild animals or dead bodies.

Zach remained mounted and, when William nodded to him, spoke to the crowd; “I know that every one of us would like to be able to lie down in a real bed in a real house tonight. Unfortunately, we won’t be able to do it. Not until tomorrow. The first thing in the morning, we will sweep the town with a couple of troops, and then I want an assessment done of the buildings.

“Peter Smith, Bill Santini, Rafael DeLeon and Mike Blaine, I want you to follow the troops and look over the buildings for problems with construction, water, anything you can think of. Jonas, you and Sven, look over the farmhouse with TJ and see if there is anything that needs repairing.

“For the rest of the day, we relax.”

“You can relax when you have finished the fire pit and gathering wood and bring in some meat,” Misha Burchinski interrupted.

“Yes, ma’am,” grinned Zach and went with some of the older men to carry out her orders.

Before supper, Pastor Simmons climbed up on the seat of a wagon

and called for everyone's attention. When the camp had gathered, he began a prayer of thanksgiving, but, after five minutes, it became a litany of sins they had committed, were committing now or were going to commit in the future. The members of the crowd were getting restless and the ones at the back of the gathering were edging away when William roared out 'Amen' as the Pastor paused for a breath. The rest of the camp roared back 'Amen' and the prayer broke up, much to the disgust of Pastor Simmons.

The next morning saw a bustle among the troopers. Zach took Matt's and Curtis' troops, Peter Smith, Bill Santini, Rafael DeLeon and Mike Blaine with him to search Mitchell. He would pick up the Andy Scales' troop on the way. Unnoticed, Pastor Simmons followed them at a distance.

They dismounted at the city square and tied the horses to the trees, benches and bushes and left the older men to stand guard. The town consisted of six streets with six cross streets. The north-south streets were numbered from the east and the east-west streets were named after presidents with Washington in the south, followed by Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Jackson. The town square was between 2nd and 5th streets and Jefferson and Madison. Starting along, groups of troopers moved to the west, searching each house and building. Where there were bodies, which happened to be very few, the troopers marked the house by tying a cloth around the front door handle. When a block was cleared, the older men began their inspection of the buildings. Each team had a piece of chalk found in the stationary shop and used it to mark the houses with problems.

First Street

When the search was complete, with only a few feral dogs encountered and killed, Zach had the troopers get wheelbarrows, gloves and

masks from the hardware store and cart the bodies to a shed on the outskirts of town.

The twelve bodies were to be burned when the wind died down and didn't pose a problem to the town. When he heard this, Pastor Simmons protested, saying that the Lord commanded that burial was the only Christian method of disposing of bodies. Zach had one of the troopers get a shovel from the hardware store and Zach tossed it to the Pastor and told him to dig all of the graves he wanted.

By the time the cleanup and survey was done, the wind had died down and Zach set fire to the shed where the bodies had been laid. Pastor Simmons intoned a prayer while the building burned. When the structure collapsed in a shower of sparks, he found that the only ones still in attendance were the troopers assigned as firefighters.

Zach set troopers to guard the stores and headed back to the lower valley to speak with the Council. They agreed that the caravan should move into town and quarters assigned. The city council chambers would be used to assemble the new citizens of Mitchell to hold an inaugural town meeting.

There was a general holiday bustle as the wagons were packed and the camp cleaned. The wagons followed the trucks up the hill to Mitchell.

The wagons and trucks were parked around the central plaza. William and the rest of the Council herded the people to the courthouse. Slowly, they began to move in that direction and Zach dismounted next to the WWII memorial in the center of the plaza. He tied his mount, with a neck rope, to a cement bench within easy reach of grass and some bushes and removed the saddle and bridle, stacking them on the bench. He walked across to the courthouse, encouraging people to follow him as quickly as possible.

The members of the Council chivvied the last of the stragglers into the courthouse and occupied the council seats on the dais at the front of the room. When all are seated, William dusted off the gavel and called for order, rapping the gavel to quiet the room.

“Thank you, thank you, let’s quiet down now,” he began, standing at the speaker’s podium. “I suppose the first order of business is to elect a council, now that we are home.”

“You guys are doing just fine,” cried out Bill Santini. “I make a motion we keep the Council we got now. All in favor say ‘Aye’”

The audience gave a rousing ‘Aye’.

“I don’t suppose we have a Robert’s Rules of Order anywhere around,” quipped Rafael.

After the laughter died down, William called on Zach to report the day’s findings.

“We did the survey and, aside from a few dogs, we didn’t find anything. We removed bodies from some of the houses and burned them at the other end of town. The houses that had bodies are marked with a large ‘X’ on the front door. I say we air those out for a couple of days before anyone takes up residence. The mattresses the dead were lying on were burned, also.

“Sven and Jonas will report on the ranch buildings in the lower valley and Bill, Peter, Raf and Mike can tell you about the buildings in town. For now, until we get households set up, we take a communal meal in the hotel’s restaurant. We can use the hotel to house the single troopers on the first and third floors and single ladies on the second, for sure and any others who don’t want to set up in a house or one of the apartments over the stores.”

Pastor Simmons jumped out of his chair and demanded the church and parsonage as his and insisted that the single women would live with him to keep them from carnal temptation. He stood in the face of muttered opposition, but William called for quiet before things got out of hand.

“Pastor, I don’t see why you can’t have the church and live in the parsonage, but the living arrangements will be handed out by the Council. I have the map of the city here, with the livable houses and apartments marked. Anyone who is going to live in the hotel, here, can go ahead and get out of here and we will work up the housing assignments for the rest.”

As the troopers started to rush out of the room, Zach bellowed, “Form up in the lobby of the hotel, gentlemen. Troop leaders, to me.”

When the troopers were assembled, Zach led Curtis’ and Andy’s groups up the stairs to the third floor. There were nineteen rooms to the floor. At the top of the stairs, he turned left and opened 315. “Curtis, this is yours.” At 314 and 313 he assigned two troopers each. Nils Beckstrom was issued 312.

“Wait a minute,” said Pete Burns, running out of the room he was to share with Chance White. “This room only has one big bed. And why can’t we have our own rooms, there’re plenty”

Zach turned to Curtis and waited for him to speak. After a moments hesitation, Curtis replied, “I guess that means that you will either share that bed with Chance or find an unassigned room with two beds and swap the big one for two that fit. As to why you can’t have your own room? Because you were assigned one with Chance, that’s why.”

“Oh,” said Pete amid the laughter of his mates.

Zach smiled and nodded. To the rest he said, “Before you start

pillaging, I'll assign the rest of the rooms on this floor. Andy, take 311.

Ricardo, as the oldest, take 309. You two, 310. You two, 308. Mike, you have 307.

"Don't worry, as we get more recruits, Ricardo will get a roommate," Zach said at the whispered protests. "Now, get whatever gear you have and get settled in. There will be an inspection in one hour and I want this place spotless. Anything in the closets or drawers, put in room 301, we'll sort it out later."

He returned to the lobby and led Matt and his men to the first floor. Matt was given 115, Edward Yu and Don Wright, 114; Josh White and Bill Santini, 113 and Gary Christensen, 112. On the doors to rooms 102, 104, 105 and 106, he wrote in chalk 'T4' for Luther's troop. On 107, 108, 109, 110 and 111, he wrote 'T3' for Gregory's troop.

Once he had returned to the ground floor, Zach took rooms 1 and 2, a connecting suite, as his rooms. He spent the next hour removing the two single beds from room two and moving the queen from room 1 to replace them. He rearranged the couch and desk and brought in two overstuffed chairs from another room, along with a couch and finished furnishing his office. After he made the bed, he packed the clothes from the closets and dressers, keeping several shirts, pairs of jeans, white socks and a pair of hiking boots, he found. Then he unpacked his meager belongings and, after a moment's hesitation, slung his holster around his waist and settled the revolver in a comfortable position on his hip.

He mounted the stairs to the second floor and knocked on Curtis' open door. At his invitation, Zach entered the room and closed the door. "I don't like to embarrass you in front of your men, so I will inspect your room

in private.” Zach looked at the equipment stacked in the corner and indicated the closet. While Curtis was putting the clutter away, Zach took a turn around the rest of the room and complemented him on its neatness.

“Call your troopers out, now, if you would.”

When the troopers were lined up outside of their rooms and had been prodded into standing at attention at either side of the doors, Zach entered room 314. There was a crash and he walked out again, saying to Curtis, “I want that room cleaned up in three minutes. Find a broom. Do you want to look in the other rooms and let me know if I would be wasting my time inspecting them?”

Zach waited until Curtis had done a survey of the rooms. Meanwhile, Andy’s men had scrambled back into their quarters. When Curtis returned with a disgusted look on his face, Zach took him aside and said quietly, “Curtis, you are responsible for your men and their gear. That includes their rooms. I don’t want to see any sloppiness. This is a military installation and I expect it to be kept neat and clean. See to it, will you?” he finished with a slap on the back. He left Curtis to bring order to the chaos and walked down to where Andy was grinning at him.

“Lesson learned, Zach.”

The inspection of Andy’s troop went better than Curtis’ and Zach only had a few minor things to criticize. After inspecting Curtis’ rooms for a second time, he asked the troop leaders to assemble their men in the lobby and wait for him.

Word had reached Matt so he made sure that his men had done a good job on their quarters. They accompanied Zach to the lobby and he spoke to them. “You may think I was a little anal up there, but there are reasons for

keeping your gear and rooms neat. You will notice that I didn't inspect your weapons. I suspect that they have not all been cleaned and oiled properly. Next time expect me to check everything.

“Most importantly, you will stack your weapons and gear in the same place, each time and every time. If there is an attack, I don't want you turning on lights and making targets out of yourselves while you look under beds and in corners for stuff. I don't want you tripping over clothing, equipment or each other. When we have drills, and we will, I expect that each of you will be armed and ready in a split second.”

He had the leaders dismiss their troops and gave them another hour to clean their weapons and straighten whatever problems he had discovered in their rooms. Meanwhile, he met with the troop leaders and worked out assignments if there was an alarm.

As he was finishing, the Council came in looking for him. He led them to his rooms and invited them to sit. The housing had been assigned and the mason, Peter Smith, was checking the chimneys and venting for stoves and heaters. Bill Santini, Jonas Ward and Sven Beckstrom were looking at the structural soundness and roofs, cleaning off the solar panels and replacing those that were damaged. Rafael DeLeon had taken a wagon and a chain saw from the Emporium and was doing a survey of the woods behind the town. The water was not flowing and Mike Blaine was trying to trace the water line and see what the problem was.

Since the town was a tourist attraction, there was a blacksmith shop, which Charlie Wright was inspecting. He was confident that if it truly had a working forge, he could start turning out ironwork.

Doc had taken over the doctor's house with its twelve-bed infirmary

and had started to assemble all of the group's medical supplies. He had commandeered several of the troopers to help him load up the medicines and supplies he wanted from the town pharmacy and the grocery and convenience stores.

William acted nervous and said that he had been made the quartermaster. He hesitated and cleared his throat and said to Zach, "We elected you to be the Justice of the Peace, Zach."

"WHAT!?!"

"Now, calm down. That makes you a sort of judge and gives you the right to, um, marry people and such."

"MARRY PEOPLE. WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR?"

"Come on, Zach. Keep your voice down."

"Okay. I'm calm. See, I'm calm," Zach said between clenched teeth. "Are you people crazy? What do I know about marrying people? What do I know about being a judge, even? Hell, I'm leaving in a few weeks, anyway. William, you be the judge."

"Well, it came up about marrying and all and that Simmons kinda butted in and by the time everything was said and done, you had been elected."

"What are you talking about?"

Charlie spoke up and William, wiping perspiration from his face, gratefully sat down. "Simmons wanted to have 'tests' to make sure that couples were good Christians before he would marry them. He wanted them to be able to recite passages from the Bible, for God's sake. He wanted complete control over this, said it had to be done according to the Church,

meaning his doctrine. I don't trust that little runt," Charlie finished.

They finally managed to convince Zach that he had the job and they were discussing work schedules when Mike Blaine came in, covered with dust and wiping his hand on a dirty rag. "I found out what the problem is. The pipe is busted, up by the reservoir. I looked in the hardware store and there are parts there to fix it. What I need is someone to go into every house and turn off the water. If they can't find the main valve, turn off every faucet, water heater and spigot they can find. When I do get the water flowing, I want someone on the main to cut it off, if we find some big problem."

He had spoken so fast that no one else could get a word in edgewise. They thanked him and asked him to let them know when he needed the help. As he left, Sven Beckstrom came in and sat wearily in a chair. "You told him?" he asked William. He grinned at William's nod. "Good. Now, the quarters that were assigned are in pretty good shape. One house needs a new hot water heater to replace the old one that burst. It amazes me that the old style tank heaters are still in use, but most of them are tankless.

"Two houses need roof work, so I will need a couple of helpers for a week."

Zach had been taking notes and had started a work roster while Mike and Sven were talking. He looked at Charlie and asked, "Charlie, do you need any help with the forge and blacksmith shop?"

"Yes, I could use two or three helpers for a week to get the place cleaned up. The biggest need is coal or charcoal, but Raf is working on that for me."

"William?"

"Do I need help? You bet. I can use all of the help I can get. I want

to go through all the places that are empty and collect food, clothing, blankets, bedding, furniture. You know, supplies. The large pieces of furniture, beds, refrigerators and such can be stored in the back of the hardware store, if we do some rearranging. I could use a troop and a couple of wagons.

“There are a lot of seeds in the hardware and variety stores. I have separated them into edibles and flowers. TJ already came up to get some for the garden he is putting in. Alvin Young is looking around up here for a suitable spot to plant another garden. Just keeping those two plots weeded and watered will, probably, take a troop full-time.

“I’ve asked some of the women to help, but there are a lot of kids around and they will need watching. Speaking of kids, Gail O’Malley is pushing for a school and I have a list of supplies she gave me.” He looked bewildered as he took the three-page list from his coat pocket and opened it up to show them. “To fill this, we are going to have to go to a town with an actual school. That kind of thing. She is asking about the electricity. She would like to set up virtual blackboards, which would save room and the need for markers and boards. I suggested chalk and I’m lucky she didn’t sit me in a corner with a dunce cap.”

Zach shook his head and looked over his notes. He told them that there was an immediate need for eight to ten troops. Of these, five to six were a permanent demand. “Permanents include two to three for guard rotation, another for fuel gathering, one for farming, one for herding duties and, I would strongly encourage, one for scout and exploration.

“William, Mike, Sven and Charlie all need full or partial troops for immediate work.

“There is really only one solution and that is to take Penny Schummer

up on her idea and form women's troops. That is probably going to set off a firestorm and I think I will go out hunting for a month while the Council covers its collective backside. Even if the community is in general agreement, I don't think Penny and her girls will settle for gardening and guarding. They will want to have full training. Hell, I can guarantee it. I've heard talk from some of the boys about the girls wanting to learn how to shoot and ride."

The council members looked stunned at the idea. They all began talking at once. The discussion evolved from flat out refusal to 'girls' duties' to a reluctant acceptance of the formation of the troops and full training. Charlie's argument, in favor of the proposal, won the day when he pointed out that the girls would have as much, if not more, to lose than the boys.

William suggested that they formalize the military units and designations, along with duties and requirements. They hammered out the rules for all services, based on a regular to militia forces concept. All male members between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one were required to be in a regular troop. After the age of twenty-one, they became members of the community militia or they could remain on active duty. Upon turning fifteen, a boy could request entry into the troops, but it was up to the judgment of the commander whether to allow it. Troops with male members would be designated with numbers.

Female members of the community, on their sixteenth birthday, could request to become members of a troop and they would be assigned and given training equal to the male troopers. A female trooper would become ineligible to serve when she became married, pregnant or at age twenty-one. They would thereafter become members of the community militia. Troops with female members would be designated with letters.

William agreed to write up the rules and distribute them at the next town meeting. Zach was asked to speak with TJ and Penny about the Council's decision.

Before they broke up, Pastor Simmons rushed in and demanded to speak with the Council. "When I heard about the living arrangements, I felt compelled to speak," he started in his best pulpit voice. "You cannot allow the single girls to live here in the hotel with the single boys. It is indecent and immoral." He folded his arms across his chest, hugging his ever-present bible, challenging them to contradict him.

With a disgusted look on his face, William asked, "And I suppose that you would take them under your wing and they could live with you?"

"That would be a burden which I would be willing to pick up," he answered. "They would be protected in a Christian household and God would protect them from the lusts of their bodies and the temptations of this earth."

"Who would protect them from you, you old goat?" muttered Charlie.

Before the sputtering Pastor could reply, Zach held up his hands and stepped between the two men. "Pastor, we all appreciate your offer, but there will be only two girls under twenty and four adult women to chaperone. Mrs. Burchinski, who will be in charge of the dining room and her daughter have the big suite at the end of the hall, Alice Sanders, Jane Washington and Carla Rangel will make sure that Constance Williams comes to no harm."

"No," stubbornly said the Pastor. "They will need Christian counseling and the protection of our just God. This is a spiritual matter, gentlemen, and will be decided by your spiritual leader. Myself."

"I'm sorry, Pastor, this is a matter for the women to decide. I will tell them of your offer and they will make up their own minds."

The Pastor stormed out of the room, muttering about hellfire and damnation.

“We could just shoot him and put all of us out of his misery,” said Sven. “It would solve many problems and provide a lot of community joy.”

William stood up and said with a weary chuckle, “Gentlemen, lets organize a town meeting and get unelected, shall we?”

The rest laughed and the meeting broke up, leaving Zach to ponder on the prospects of the community and when he was going to leave for the Rockies.

Chapter 6

Town Meeting

Summer 2041

Finally, we made it to Mitchell. I will wait for a few weeks to let them get settled and then I am off! Pastor Simmons will turn out to be a problem, but that is not my worry, thank God. After they get a government, I won't be needed anymore. At least they are out of range of the Mahdists and these valleys are defensible, but it would be better with more people. Too bad the second batch didn't make it. The water problem is solvable, the reservoir can be repaired and water will flow to the inhabited portions of the town.

There is good grazing and, if the llamas produce, there will be meat from the cattle and wool from the llamas for clothing. I am glad that the Mahdists allowed the artisans and blue-collar workers to live. Without Mile Blaine and his crew, the water system would never be repaired. Jonas Ward and the Santini's, Grace and Bill, are carpenters and wood workers, so there should be no problem with repairs to the houses, wagons and they will take the weaving equipment apart to make duplicates. Charlie Wright can set up a blacksmith shop, if they can find iron to work with and fuel. Maybe, they can make charcoal. Mike Stuart and Andy Scales are good enough mechanics and they can keep the weapons repaired, too. We are a little shy of farmers, but how hard can it be to dig up the ground and drop in a seed?

Tonight is a town meeting to decide how these people will govern themselves. I just hope that it is based on Law, not pure Democracy. The

founding fathers warned us about that three hundred years ago.

At least there won't be any silly gun control laws or social programs for drones. At least, I hope so. Simmons will want his church supported, but I think that these people are smarter than that.

The town meeting was held at the town hall that evening. The settlers were in a boisterous mood. They had been tested and survived to reach a safe haven. When William gaveled the meeting to order, the crowd slowly settled into seats. William took it upon himself to act as moderator. The committee members were seated on the dais.

Pastor Simmons began with a windy prayer, but cut it short when William cleared his throat and shot him a significant look. William replaced him at the podium and smoothed out a sheaf of papers. He cleared his throat and looked out over the audience. He detailed the tasks that had been completed so far and congratulated everyone on his or her hard work. He held up a piece of paper saying, "This is a list of the people in charge of some of our projects. I will post it on the bulletin board in the foyer out front."

Mike Blaine – Master Plumber

Rafael DeLeon – Fuel Master

Jonas Ward, Grace and Bill Santini – Master Woodworkers/
Carpenters

Charlie Wright – Master Blacksmith

Mike Stuart and Andy Scales – Master Mechanics

Tom and Mary Schummer – Master Llama Husbandry

Tim Mills – Master Cattle Herder

Sven Beckstrom – Master Butcher

Alvin Young – Master Farmer

William Smith – Quartermaster/Lead Farmer

John ‘Doc’ White - Medic

Pastor Simmons - Chaplain

Zach Banducci – Military Leader

Gail O’Malley – School Principal

William held up another sheet of paper and said it was the troop assignments. After reading off the names of the troop leaders, William took another deep breath and announced Jenny Scales as the leader of the auxiliary troop. It took a moment for the implications to seep in, but there was soon an outcry from the audience.

The discussion, to put it politely, went on for a half-hour. It took William several minutes of gaveling to restore order. Margaret Gonzales, by stubbornly refusing to sit down was the first speaker. “My daughter will not be any part of this,” she stated in no uncertain terms, despite the look she got from her daughter. “It’s bad enough that we got dragged out here into this wilderness without her thrust in the middle of a war.”

TJ stood and asked her what she thought would happen if the Mahdists beat the few troops that had been formed. Did she think that they would leave them alone because they hadn’t been in the fight? He admitted that the idea of his daughter going to war didn’t make him comfortable, but he realized the ramifications if the Mahdists did get a hold of her.

Mike Blaine leapt to his feet and pointed a finger at Mrs. Gonzales. “Margaret, you still have your daughter. How many of us had ours ripped

from our arms and taken away to New Mecca to, to be concubines to some greasy, green turbaned pig? I don't wish their fate on Connie, but that will be her fate, if they ever conquer this community."

Tess White slowly stood. There were tears on her cheeks, which she daubed away with her handkerchief. She looked around at the rest of the settlers, meeting every eye. "I lost two daughters. I will join the auxiliary troop myself to protect my last one," she said, reaching down to clutch Donna's hand. "We will all need to fight, like the settlers who came before us. My several greats grandmother came to Colorado as a young bride and her diary is filled with the stories of her hardships. She fought Indians, rustlers and the elements to make a home.

"Get it out of your head that there is a policeman on the corner to save you from, from, well, from anything. We are the only ones who can save ourselves and you can imagine what will happen if we don't. So, Donna will join the auxiliary in my place, if she wants, but, regardless, she will learn to shoot." With another look around, this one defiant, she sat down. Doc put his arm around her and kissed her.

Others rose, in their turn, and expressed their opinions until there was nothing left to be said. A vote was taken and the opposition reluctantly succumbed to the arguments and the vote was unanimous to form an auxiliary troop.

Matt Busby – Leader Scout troop + 5 troopers

Josh Blaine – Leader of 2nd troop + 5 troopers

Yancey Miles – Leader of 3rd troop + 5 troopers

Luther Smith – Leader of 4th troop + 5 troopers

Mike Stuart – Leader of 5th troop (mechanized) + Andy Scales
+ 7 troopers + 6 trucks/wagons

Jenny Scales – Leader of Auxiliary + 8 female troopers

William then read the two documents regarding service in the troops and they were passed with minimal discussion. The next order of business was the codifying the form of government and laws. Pastor Simmons immediately jumped to his feet and demanded that the Ten Commandments be the set of laws governing the community. The statement caused uproar, with most of the community opposed to the idea.

It took several minutes to gavel the meeting back to order. William scolded the room for refusing to hear all ideas. Zach walked to the board and wrote “10 Commandments”. He added “US Constitution Model” and turned back to William. Matt Busby was recognized and inquired as to whether the US Constitution is too complex for such a small community and proposed just using the Bill of Rights as the basis. Zach wrote “Bill of Rights”.

When Jonas Ward stood and asked if slavery would be allowed and what other protections would be included, William said, “It’s obvious that we won’t be able to resolve this here. There is too much to think about and discuss. I propose that a committee be set up to take up the question and report back in a couple of weeks.” The proposal was moved and seconded and passed. Zach suggested that William be the chair and the members include Matt, the Pastor, Greg Morgan and TJ.

William wiped the sweat from his forehead and called for the Masters to report their progress. One after the other they took the podium to report. When it came to Zach, he said he would post the duty rotations on the bulletin

board and asked any of the girls who wanted to join the auxiliary troop to contact Jenny Scales. Their training would start in three days. He wanted volunteers to become apprentices to the settlement Masters. Everyone would learn a trade, in addition to his or her other duties.

“Changing hats,” he continued, “as Justice of the Peace, I will hold court and perform the other duties of my office as necessary. Any marriage ceremonies will require the couples to fill out a formal request and the banns to be posted for three weeks before the ceremony.”

Pastor Simmons jumped to his feet and charged the podium. “Marriage is a sacrament and can only be performed by an ordained minister. This is the reason why God’s punishment has been visited on the world,” he sputtered. Turning to the floor, he spat out, “We cannot continue these sinful ways if we want to walk in God’s mercy again. There can be no marriages, unless sanctioned by the church. Sanctioned and blessed for devout Christians, only. We must wipe out the desecrations and carnal ways of our fathers and return to the true path.”

Again, he was shouted down. After trying to make himself heard, he stormed out of the meeting. William shook his head and most of those in the room knew that this was not the last they would hear on the topic.

Quiet was once again restored and William asked Gail to present her report. The short woman with her graying hair severely pulled back in a tight bun refused the podium and stood at the front of the stage. Everyone looking at her knew that she was a teacher and had never been anything else. She looked over the audience like they were in detention and declared that school would commence on the next Monday and she and Penny Quinn would organize the students into their proper classes, based on skill levels rather than

age, which had become increasingly popular during the last few years before the Troubles. Turning to William and the rest of the Council, she stated, “You will put a troop at my disposal to organize and clean the school.” Without waiting for a reply, she returned to her seat.

William asked if there was any new business. There wasn’t and the meeting was dismissed with the next scheduled for two weeks time, unless something important arose in the meantime.

The following week saw a large improvement in the settlement. The school was readied, though there was a lack of supplies, and classes begun. All of the occupied houses were repaired and their solar panels cleaned and brought up to standard. The whole town celebrated the restoration of the water system.

Training for the troops continued under the tutelage of Zach. He devised a manual of arms for mounted infantry, which was heavily dependant on movement to a position and dismounting to fight. They practiced both attack and defense and firing from the ground and mounted. Zach admitted it might not be the correct methodology, but horsemanship, weapons accuracy and camaraderie improved.

Surprise inspections kept the equipment clean and in good repair, since the punishment was being assigned to one of the more unpleasant tasks for a week. One stint at the end of a ‘muck stick’ cleaning out the stable or cleaning septic tanks usually cured a trooper of slovenliness.

Cross training of the troopers increased the pool of knowledge within the community and everyone, including Zach participated in every job. Several of the troopers exhibited a talent for one type of work or another and were assigned as apprentices.

Two weeks passed with no sign of pursuit by the Mahdists and a sense of calm pervaded the settlement, though they were still vigilant. Matt and his troop of scouts made weekly sweeps of the area. When one troop became familiar with the area, Matt was assigned a different troop to lead on the sweeps. Within a few months, Zach would stop a trooper and question him about terrain, water and game, and woe betide him if he was in error. It meant a special session in the War Room, which contained a series of Forest Service maps of the region. On it were marked salient points the scouts had brought in from their patrols.

The town meeting scheduled to discuss the governmental organization was held and everyone not on guard duty was present.

The meeting opened with William calling for order. He reported that the committee had come up with a modified version of the U.S. Constitution. The Bill of Rights was included in its entirety and several of the other Amendments were combined. The Executive Branch consisted of a Governor, elected yearly and limited to two consecutive terms, three sets of terms in a lifetime.

The Legislative Branch consisted of one representative for each 20 members of population who were of voting age, elected at-large. This provision could be changed only by a two-thirds vote of the citizens. Term limits for representatives were the same as for the Governor. Voting age was set at sixteen, fifteen for members of the military.

Three judges would be elected for five-year periods, limited to a single term in a lifetime. This provision caused some questions from the audience. William pointed out that a judge shouldn't be subject to political pressures, so it was decided that the term for a judge had to be limited in some

manner, either a lifetime appointment or a shorter term and no chance of reelection. They decided on a five-year term arbitrarily. After a lengthy discussion, the term was left at five years. The main task of the judges would be to review laws passed by the Legislative Branch and decisions of the Justice of the Peace to decide if they were legal under the constitution.

The only office under any of the branches was that of Justice of the Peace. This position would be responsible for civil marriages, minor infractions of the law and any other task not relegated to the judges. The office fell under the auspices of the Judicial Branch.

There were only three levels of punishment for infractions. Extra duty would be assigned for minor infractions; banishment for a period of time or life for major infractions; and death, to be affirmed by the full panel of judges.

After the document was read and there was no more discussion, William asked for any suggestions on provisions, which had been left out. Pastor Simmons demanded that mandatory religious services be included, but there was no second and the motion died.

When no other suggestions were offered, a secret ballot was held and the proposed Constitution was accepted. William proposed elections to be held, now that there was a constitution and Charlie White stood up and proposed William for governor and Zach for Justice of the Peace. They were carried by voice vote.

With seventy members in the community of voting age, four names were proposed for the Council, but Zach refused when his name came up, insisting that no one could hold more than one office concurrently. The slate was elected by voice vote. Sven Beckstrom, Gail O'Malley, Josh Blaine and

Charlie White took their seats on the stage and were sworn in by Pastor Simmons, their hands placed on his copy of the bible.

When it came time to elect the judges, five names were proposed, including Pastor Simmons. William insisted on a secret ballot, with the Council to oversee the count. When the ballots were tallied, Maria DeLeon, Peter Smith and Ricardo Gonzalez were elected. With scant grace, Pastor Simmons swore in the new judges and the meeting was adjourned.

Chapter 7

Mahdists at the Door

Summer 2041

What a chore. They elected me as the Justice of the Peace, yet. There is something more to it than wanting me in that lame position, but I don't know what it was. I was elected mostly by the younger element, as far as I can tell.

From what I have read, this went a lot more smoothly than the 1785 Constitutional Convention. I knew Simmons would be a problem. Maybe, we can get him for a major infraction and banish him. He is still trying to get the single women and girls under his protection. Gail O'Malley says that should never happen, the man wants a harem. Me, I would never cross that lady. She is one tough cookie.

Things in town are improving: most homes have water and Mike Blaine says he can hook up to the sewer system, but can't guarantee how long it will last until the septic tanks are full. That would be a great 'extra duty' for any miscreants. One shot at emptying a septic tank with a bucket will drive anyone to the straight-and-narrow.

We have improved the defenses at the main and upper entrances. There is a trench across each road with a collapsible bridge. If we are attacked, we can drop the bridges and prevent any mounted attack, either with horses or vehicles. There were several rolls of barbed wire in the Emporium and we created barriers, which could be rolled out of the way for going in and

out. On the hills, we set up rifle pits and a machine gun nest over the front entrances and a troop is always assigned to the trail we found over the mountains behind. I am torn between blocking it and having it for an escape route, if needed.

The troops are training in movement and horsemanship. There is a growing dissatisfaction among some of the older girls about not being allowed to participate as troopers now that they have been organized into an auxiliary. I am sure that this will come up again.

Zach was on the training field with Three Troop when Jenny rode up. He could tell that this wasn't going to be a social visit by the set of her lips and the flush on her cheeks. A pleasant greeting as she pulled her mount to a skidding halt, raising a cloud of dust, didn't ease the situation.

"What can I do for you, Jenny?" he asked quietly.

"I heard that you are sending out Two Troop on scout, again. It should be our turn after Four Troop gets back." She sat leaning forward, her body stiff with anger, her face inches from his.

"Two can play at this game," Zach thought and leaned forward until his nose touched hers.

Startled, Jenny jerked her body back and caused her horse to skitter around in a circle. She brought her mount back under control and faced Zach again. Her anger had surged because Zach had made her back off. "It's our turn and you had better let us go or, or..."

"Or what?" Zach's temper had begun to heat up under the attack. "I was appointed military commander, here, whether you or I like it or not.

"The first rule of command happens to be: Obey Orders. Don't you

ever come charging up to me making demands or threats. Ever. That is something you had better understand or I will bounce you out of the Auxiliary Troop faster than you can blink.”

“Look, Jenny,” Zach said, holding on tightly to his anger, “you are not going on the maneuvers, not because I think that girls should wear frills and go to tea parties. I know that we are all in this together. Females have quicker reactions and can be taught to shoot as well as any man.

“The reason you are not going out is to make sure the troopers minds are on their jobs, not on you.”

“But...,” Jenny started to say. Zach interrupted her with a quick wave of his hand.

“No. You will listen to me! There are over thirty troopers and only nine girls of marriageable age. If you ladies are out there, the troopers will be trying to protect you and probably get themselves killed. Plus, if we are to be a viable community we need, to put it bluntly, breeding stock for the next generation. If, by some chance, we have a population boom, rest assured that I would boot your cute little butt onto the firing line faster than you can say ‘hop’.

“In the meantime, learn how to shoot, because, if we are attacked, you will need to defend this community just like everyone else. Hell, I would carry the babies, if there were any, to the front and let them throw their rattles, if it would help.

“Now, do you understand?” he asked.

Jenny nodded and started to apologize, but Zach was already riding away towards the milling Three Troop, muttering to himself.

Later that same day, while the troop and Zach were caring for their

mounts, TJ approached and informed Zach that they had found two calves killed by big cats. TJ thought they were holed up in the high country, coming down at night to hunt. He was worried that they would get into the llama pens. Cattle could be replaced, but the llamas couldn't.

Zach gathered the troop leaders together that evening and proposed a hunt for the predators. They laid out a map of the area in the War Room and pinpointed the location of the attacks. Peter Santini, considered the best tracker, reported that the cats had followed a deer trail back to the mountains and he pointed out where he thought they were laid up. He said that a hunting pair indicated that there might be a den with cubs and they would be very dangerous if cornered.

The three troops not on duty were assembled in the west end of the valley and formed a skirmish line behind Pete, who was a hundred yards in advance. They walked their horses to the path Pete had found and progress became slower as the ground rose and the trees broke up the formation. Just as the valley floor started to rise to the first low, dark hills, a slaughtered calf was found and the cry of a cougar interrupted in its feast startled the riders.

Three Troop dropped back when the hills began to crowd together. They formed a line against any possibility of the quarry backtracking. The rest moved out, weapons in hand. Darkness fell and the troopers rested in place until moonrise. Pete appeared out of the dark and approached Zach.

“We are close. There is a hill ahead the path curves around. There has been a lot of coming and going by the cats, their tracks are all over the place and I found scat, some new and some old.”

The men became restless with the waiting and several times Zach had to order quiet. When the moon finally rose, it revealed a scene striped with

cool light and dark shadow. Pete moved off, again, with the troopers close behind him. As they circled the hill, something made Matt look up. Directly above Pete a sinuous form was crouched. The cougar's tail lashed rapidly back and forth, then stilled as it bunched its muscles for a leap. Matt didn't have time to take aim, so he simply tilted the muzzle of his rifle and shot from the hip.

The bullet smashed into the rock next to the cougar, spraying it with bits of rock and spoiling its leap. Pete dropped and rolled on his back, firing from the ground into the shadow above him. Several other shots rang out in echo to Pete's and the cat landed with a heavy thud, killed in the air.

Pete arose and shakily wiped the sweat from his forehead. He picked up his hat and struck the hindquarters of the cougar before putting it back on. He glanced at Zach and the troopers and nodded, then began a slow advance around to the back of the hill. Zach ordered several of the troopers to keep an eye on the hillside and led the mounted men forward.

A faint trail split from the main path and Pete indicated that the den was in that direction. Pete led a dismounted One Trooper up the path and crouched down when he spotted the dark opening in the rock. He picked up a stone, whispered for them to get ready and tossed it into the cave mouth. The remaining cat bounded out of the opening, straight at them. The volley of shots brought it down, skidding to within a few feet of Matt, who prodded it with his rifle barrel.

An inspection of the cave revealed three cubs, only a few days old, mewling at the back of the large room. Zach drew his revolver and shot each one. He didn't need to explain the necessity of his actions, though there was little joy in it. The bodies were thrown into the bushes for the varmints to

claim and Zach inspected the cave.

The opening was roughly ten by ten, narrowing at the back. He was about to abandon the search when he felt a slight breeze on his cheek. A closer inspection with several more lights revealed that a rock fall had blocked off a crack, which led further into the hillside. A few minutes work cleared the blockage and Edward Yu, the smallest trooper, managed to squeeze through the opening. His voice echoed in what was a much larger chamber.

When he returned, he reported that it looked like the whole hill was hollow and a big cavern was behind the front cave. There was a large pool of fresh, cold water. The overflow dropped through a hole in the floor and disappeared. Several others wanted to enlarge the opening and explore, but Zach vetoed the idea.

“We need a lot more than hand flashlights and our bare hands. Tomorrow, Three Troop will return with Rafael DeLeon, since he’s the closest thing we have to a miner. They can bring tools and lanterns, maybe rig up a couple of solar panels for electric lights. Meanwhile, let’s get back to town.”

Several of the troopers wanted to take the skins back as trophies and Zach finally agreed. Pete Santini had willing hands to help him hang the two cats and skin them. A triumphant, though bloody, group returned to town as dawn was breaking.

The next morning Zach took Rafael aside and asked him if he had time to lead an expedition to the cave. They discussed the new source of water and the possibility of using it for a weapon and supply cache, in case they were overrun.

“That would be a good idea, if the place had another exit,” said Raf,

rubbing his scant moustache, as was his habit when pondering a problem.

“The source of water is important, but the vital element would be a second exit. Otherwise, it would just be a trap.”

Zach agreed and later that afternoon, Three Troop and Raf, leading a string of packhorses, headed back to the Cave.

TJ led a hunt to kill off the buffalo that had been in the valley when the refugees arrived. The meat would satisfy the need for food, in the short term, and any excess would be dried for emergency rations and a winter supply. The hides would be made into robes for the winter. When the bones had dried, they could be ground up for fertilizer and the offal would feed the domestic dogs and cats.

They killed no more than could be processed in a day, amounting to two to three animals. Over the next few weeks the herd dwindled from forty or so animals to none and the stack of dried meat in the Commissary grew to several tons. Peter Santini proved his worth with his skill at tanning. His helpers soon grew tired of scraping the hides, rubbing in the mixture of brains and tallow to soften them and generally hauling the awkward things around from stretching frames to the river running through the valley, where they were soaked for several hours at a time.

Rafael sent word that the trail leading past the Cave led through a saddle to the plains below. This is what they had feared – a backdoor. Zach sent word back to set up a watch at the saddle and that he would be there the next day. However, as he was packing his saddlebags for the trip, a rider from Two Troop galloped in. He slid from his well-lathered horse and bolted up the hotel steps, almost knocking Zach off his feet.

Chance was several feet past Zach before he realized who he had

almost run down. He skidded to a stop and ran back, skidding to a halt and gasping out, “The Mahdists. They’re coming.”

Zach took Chance by the arm and pushed him into the dining room, fiercely telling him to keep his voice down. “Do you want to start a panic? Get control of yourself!” Zach hissed through clenched teeth. When he looked around, he saw that several troopers were gathered at the doorway. He waved them in and shut the door.

“Gregory, get your weapon and head for the church. Do not, I repeat, do not let anyone ring the bell unless I personally tell you to. Got that?” Gregory nodded and headed for the door. They heard him pound up the stairs to his room for his gear.

Zach whirled on Chance. “Okay, spill it. Where are they, how many and how fast are they moving?”

Chance had regained his breath and reported, “We were riding scout and stopped for noon on the Mound. While I was collecting firewood, I saw a dust cloud to the north, along the road. Matt used the glasses and said they were Mahdists, maybe thirty troops and some wagons. He told me to come in and warn you. And that’s what I did,” he finished resentfully.

“You did right, Chance. But, we don’t want to start a panic. Next time, come in calmly. From the north, huh. What are they doing from the north?” he mused. “From the north and with only half an infantry company. Were there any outriders?” he asked Chance.

“No, there didn’t seem to be any cavalry at all.”

“Christensen, calmly alert any troopers you see and tell any troop leaders I want to see them immediately. Oh, and, if you see any of the Council, tell them I need to see them, too. Tell Gregory, what Chance said.

Go.

“The rest of you, get your equipment, saddle your horses. Sam, get to the Ranch and tell your father what is happening. Help him gather the troopers down in the lower valley at the fence. Ed, get to the Cave and tell Rafael to send half of Three Troop to the fence and use the rest to guard the saddle. Bill, gather up everybody you can find and make sure they are armed and send him or her to their places, then come to the fence. Make sure you tell Doc White and have him bring his medical supplies to the Ranch. Chance, stay here and if any troop leaders or the Council show up, tell them what you told me and tell them I am going to be down at the fence. But BE CALM”

They scattered to their tasks. Zach shook his head in disgust at the panic, which seemed to be spreading. Knots of people gathered, broke up and gathered again. As he mounted his horse, he saw his messengers moving among the groups and order being sorted out of chaos. He rode down the hill, ignoring questions shouted at him, merely replying that information was at the hotel.

When he got to the fence, he found TJ had gathered the troopers assigned to the farming and herding duties at the rifle pits behind the fence. He reported that the lookout hadn't seen anything after Chance had galloped through, but he had shut the gate and sent some of the troopers to the cliff top until the militia could be assembled.

Zach picked up the phone, a line they had strung to the lookout post, and spoke with the sentry. There still was no sign of Matt's troop or the Mahdists. Frowning at the lack of news, Zach appointed TJ in charge of the defenses and mounted again. He rode through the gate, which was closed

behind him and he knew that troopers were ready to drop the bridge if Matt's troop returned in a hurry.

Pulling his M-1 carbine from its scabbard, he urged his horse into a trot and quickly rode through the wide canyon that led out to the plain. He saw the Mound as soon as he left the shadowed length of the canyon. He didn't see any smoke or hear any indication of an attack.

By the time he reached the foot of the Mound, a rider was waiting for him. The trooper turned and led him to the top of the hill, into a stand of trees on the north side. Matt and the other troopers were waiting for them. Matt led Zach to the northern edge of the trees after he dismounted and cursory greetings had been exchanged.

He took his glasses from their case. He trained the powerful binoculars on a distant camp, near the river where it bent east, following the main highway. The camp looked peaceful; there was a temporary horse corral, made of two lengths of rope strung between trees, to the west stretching along a small creek, while the main camp was set up above the confluence of the creek and the river. Zach spotted two inattentive sentries near the horse lines and no other guards. A large tent for the commander was standing at the head of a street lined with smaller tents, ranging from sub-commanders to 2-man pup tents for the common infantryman.

Stretched along the road, where it curved to the east, was a line of ten large wagons, mounded with freight and covered with tarpaulins. There were just enough horses to pull the freight wagons, and the smaller supply wagon, turned chuck wagon, with three or four mounts for officers.

Zach moved back, waving to Matt to follow him. "I wonder what's in those wagons," he said.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly,” Matt returned, grinning. “The camp isn’t too alert, is it?”

“MY thought exactly,” said Zach. “Do you think we can pull another rescue operation?”

“No way. See the green baseball caps? Those are hardcore Mahdists, top to bottom.”

Zach was disappointed. He finally mused, “I wonder what would happen if the horses were stampeded. I would bet that the commander would have to abandon the wagons and head back east for more draught horses. It would take him upwards of two weeks to march back there and return.”

“What if he leaves men to guard them?” inserted Nils Beckstrom.

“From the layout of the camp, he has around fifty men. Assuming that he leaves half. That would make our forces about equal. Add in the militia, we should be able to take the camp without a fight, especially as lax as their security seems to be. If he leaves all his men and sends a small column back then we leave well enough alone and we will have gained more horses.

“However, the first thing to do is figure out how to stampede the herd, all of them, without having the Mahdists suspect it was other than natural. A good summer storm with a lot of thunder and lightening would work, but without a cloud in the sky, that doesn’t look too possible. Any thoughts?”

A wide grin slowly spread across Nils’ face. When Matt started to ask him what was so amusing, Nils held up his hand and walked a few feet away and returned. “The cougar hides,” he said, snapping his fingers, a habit he had when he was excited and which irritated nearly everyone subjected to it. “Okay, we need someone to untie the rope corral on the western side of the trees. Just the top rope should do. That would be Pete Santini; he’s a good

sneak. Then we need a couple of people to use the cougar skins to scare the horses and cause the stampede. Boris Burchinski can imitate a cougar's cry well enough to fool these city boys. The only problem is that he is a little clumsy and the two would be between the camp and the corral. Well, that needs to be thought out.

"We can use the girls auxiliary troop and another troop to gather the horses. They could be positioned a couple of miles to the west, near the dry creek bed. We would have the rest of the troops here on the hill and the militia could cover any retreat, if things go bad.

"Boy, the only bad spot is how will Boris, Pete and I get away without being spotted."

"YOU?" Zach interjected, startling Nils out of his reverie.

"Well, it's my idea and I'm a pretty good sneak, too. I could get Boris away, I think. We're friends," he finished as if that was a crowning argument.

Zach said that he didn't see any glaring holes in the plan and Matt agreed. The only problem they did see was getting the plan organized before midnight. Zach returned to town, with Josh Blaine, who was a member of the Council, and presented the plan to the full Council. Sven Beckstrom and Gail O'Malley opposed it, saying that it was too dangerous for the three main players, one of which was Sven's son. After discussing it, the motion was passed by a three-to-two vote.

Josh was sent to find Pete and Boris, get the cougar skins and send Jenny and Miles to the fence to meet Zach. Charlie Wright and Sven Beckstrom were assigned to alert the militia of the plan and Gail and Mary were to make sure that all of the women and children were cautioned to keep

to their homes for the rest of the day and to put out all fires.

By the time Zach had organized the troopers at the fence and replaced them with militia, Jenny and Miles rode up. They were told to organize their troops with a week's rations and 200 rounds of ammunition and head out to the dry creek. He appointed Miles in charge of the two troops and a stern look stopped Jenny's protest. They rode off to gather their riders and get the supplies from the Commissary.

Josh, Boris and Pete rode up, carrying the dripping skins. Pete said that the cat odor would be enhanced due to the moisture, like a "wet gundog smell", was how he put it. They had drawn supplies from the Commissary, including nine 9mm automatics and twenty-seven magazines of ammunition. Josh explained that the Pete, Boris and Nils would not be able to take long guns with them. Zach instructed them to head for the Mound and get Boris and Nils started on their way, since they had the furthest to travel, having to circle the Mahdists camp and reach their places on foot.

Zach mounted and waited, impatiently, for Jenny and Miles to get their troops organized. Though it only took an hour, it seemed much longer to Zach, but, finally, the sixteen troopers were ready, saddlebags stuffed with supplies and extra coils of rope tied to their saddles. Zach led them out of the canyon and waved them along the west road, wishing them good luck, before heading for the Mound.

The sun was setting as he entered the trees and he found Matt chewing on jerky and drinking from his canteen. The other members of the troops were spread along the crest of the hill, overlooking the Mahdist camp. Matt reported that Nils and Boris were on their way with the cougar skins and Pete was about to set out. Pete was smearing a mixture of damp ashes and

mud on his face and hands. He was dressed in dark clothes with a dark watch cap covering his black hair. Two of the automatics were stuffed down the back of his dark jeans, under his belt. Several clips were stuffed in his back pockets and he had a wicked, eight-inch combat knife strapped to his right thigh.

They checked watches then, as the sun left the sky, Pete slipped over the rim of the Mound and began working his way to the corral. He blended so well with the darkness, the watchers lost sight of him after only a few seconds. Silence settled over the camp and Zach had the troopers try and get a few hours of sleep.

As midnight approached, they all took their places overlooking the Mahdists camp. A sentry was seated at the fire pit, his face faintly lighted by the coals. He was evidently asleep. The sentries at the corral weren't to be seen and Zach hoped that they had found a comfortable spot and were asleep, too.

The strain increased as the time approached midnight. At two minutes past, Zach was convinced that something had gone wrong, but his thoughts were interrupted by a scream out of the darkness. At first he thought that it was a human being in extreme agony, but Matt whispered that Boris was in fine voice.

Immediately, the horses in the corral began to shift nervously, then, when a second scream sounded from the vicinity of the corral, they bolted. The watchers could see the herd streaming to the west. The sentries were firing wildly to the north and northwest. The camp was in turmoil; the sergeants were having a hard time getting the infantry organized. Officers were shouting contrary orders and several shots were fired at random.

By the time a squad was dispatched to the corral, the horses were gone and, hopefully, the fake cougars, also. Several troopers started out after the horses, but were called back by the nervous officers, who didn't know if there had been an attack by hostiles or not.

Dawn found no trace of any mounts and the Mahdist commander was storming at his command. Two groups were dispatched to the west, apparently to look for signs of the animals, but returned several hours later empty-handed. This didn't improve the commander's temper. Several of the returning troopers were slashed with his riding crop and he stormed into his tent.

Several minutes later, he emerged from the tent and issued orders. The infantry scrambled to the wagons and snatched picks and shovels. The commander indicated a spot near where the wagons were parked and three holes were dug. The tarps from the wagons were pulled off the loads and three were used to line the pits. The freight was pulled off the wagons and placed in the holes. The remaining tarps covered the holes and dirt was shoveled back to bury the contents of the wagons. Another command caused the wagons to be turned over and piled on the mounds, looking as if they had been shoved off the road to remove a blockage. The excess dirt was dumped in the river.

The camp was well guarded that night and morning saw the tents struck and packed in the supply wagon. Ropes were used to jury rig harnesses and twelve men were used to haul the supply wagon, the commander walking alongside, striking any whom he thought was not pulling their weight. Matt assigned three of his scouts to follow them and keep watch.

Zach stopped a general movement by the troopers to rush down the

hill and excavate the freight. He asked Matt to send two troopers to find Jenny's and Mile's troops and bring in the horses. While he was doing this, Zach sent another trooper to let the Council know what had happened, along with his recommendation that the town return to normal and the militia be dismissed. He thanked the remaining troopers and dismissed them, except for the rest of Matt's scouts. He waited an hour and then sent these scouts to look for Pete, Nils and Boris. They were to return at nightfall, regardless of their success.

When he and Matt were alone on the hill, Zach built a fire and made coffee. Fighting a yawn, Matt asked, "Why didn't you let the boys dig up that stuff? Curiosity is killing me."

"I wanted to think about how to do it," Zach replied, sipping on hot coffee. "When the Mahdists come back for their stuff, I don't want a trail leading back to the valley. So, we can't use wagons or trucks. The tracks, tire marks, oil drips, whatever, will let them know that they have been had and we would leave some kind of trail, back to the canyon.

"The same problem with pack horses. The trail would be pretty obvious and easy to follow. And don't fool yourself. When the Mahdists return, they will bring back someone who can track. No, what we need is a false trail. We will use the Backdoor that Mr. DeLeon found and bring out a string of packhorses. We will bring them in a wide circle, through the river and swing far north before following the trail of the Mahdists.

"After we load up, we will start splitting up. Divide the pack train wherever there is hardpan, sand, a creek or river. We will disperse and bring the loads through the Backdoor. There will be some danger of them following us until they see where the Backdoor is, but we will have to live with that and,

if we are careful, we can throw them off the track and they will give up well before then.” He threw the dregs of his coffee onto the fire and stood up and walked to his horse. He patted its neck, tightened the cinch and mounted.

Matt poured the remains of the coffee on the fire, putting it out. Zach commented as Matt put the rinsed out coffee pot against a tree, “Don’t leave that here. With the Mahdists coming, we are going to have to eliminate any sign of our presence here, on the Mound. Tomorrow, I want a work party up here. Every bit of evidence of our being here is to be picked up. Dig up the ground where the fire sat and carry away the burned wood, ashes and charred dirt. Bring up a bush from the valley that matches what is here and plant it in the hole. Send someone up here along the animal path we have been using. Scatter leaves to make it look natural. Hopefully the grass will come back.

“From now on, use animal trails to move around. Talk to Pete about making boots for the horses for when you are near the mouth of the canyon. All it will take is one curious Mahdist and we will have an invasion on our hands.”

Two days later Zach took a train of 40 horses out the Backdoor, along with Two and Three Troops. They followed the trail cut by cattle and deer and reached the plain early in the day. They made a hard drive directly west until they stopped for their noon meal and to rest the horses. They broke the march on the banks of a river where the troopers had to climb down the steep banks to fetch water for the horses. After being watered, the packs and saddles were removed and the mounts were allowed to roll and crop the stem-dried grass. Ed Young noticed that there were a lot of cattle tracks amid the willows and brush on the river bottom. Zach made a mental note to organize an expedition to collect some young cows and bulls to build the Settlement’s

herd.

After an hour, the horses were saddled and the party turned north for several hours. Each rider had a small string of animals and they were spread out to leave less of a trail. They camped for the night and early the next morning, after a cold breakfast of water, biscuits and jerky, they spread out and rode east, hitting the road ten miles north of the settlement. The Mahdists camp was reached by noon and the animals were stripped of their packs.

Some of the troopers took tools from the packs while the others moved the wagons off the burial sites. While half of the troopers dug, the others stood watch. Every hour they switched. A foot of earth was removed to expose the tarps. Eager hands pulled them away and revealed the Mahdists' freight. The boxes and crates soon covered the roadway. They were marked as rifles, ammunition, uniforms, MRE, ammunition, two bazookas and three cases of shells, machine guns and more ammunition. It was a treasure trove and Zach knew that the Mahdists would be back for it as quickly as possible.

Zach realized that he had underestimated the number of packhorses he needed. He ordered the packs to be loaded and the horses' hooves to be booted. While Two Troop took the train back by the same route, Zach ordered Paul Washington to ride directly for the settlement and bring back all of the horses he can round up and make sure they are booted and bring them directly to the dig site.

He knew that this was a dangerous move, but there might not be time to use the roundabout route. The Mahdists knew how valuable the supplies were and would waste no time in sending a party out to recover them. He removed a machine gun from its case, cleaned it and loaded several belts of

ammunition. He set it up in the grove of trees where the horse corral had been. He instructed the troopers to grab cases and head for the machine gun, if the Mahdists showed. He sent to alert the troopers on watch to the east.

For the next two hours the freight was excavated and piled in the road. By the time they were finished, Paul was leading a pack train from the settlement, including llamas. TJ brought up the rear and sat grinning through his beard. “Best pack animals you will every find,” he said and dismounted.

He whistled at the pile of equipment. He started loading crates on the llamas without another word. Zach organized the loading of the horses, assigning two troopers to help TJ. When everything was packed, he sent TJ back to the settlement by the direct route, since the llamas would leave only vague prints. He ordered the holes to be filled back in and the wagons replaced. When he was satisfied, he repacked the machine gun and ammunition and moved out.

He knew the troopers were near exhaustion, but he wanted to be far away from the site when the Mahdists returned. They headed straight north on the road for several miles and then Zach started signaling a trooper every mile to peel off and strike west. They backtracked to the Backdoor. Zach was the last to arrive, well after dark. Matt was there to greet him and report that all of the pack animals had made it in and the supplies were being stored in the back room of the Emporium.

Zach led his packhorses to the Emporium and wearily slid from the saddle. Eager hands took charge of the animals and Gail O’Malley ordered him to take a bath and get some sleep. He offered only a token argument and stumbled off to the hotel, where he collapsed on his bed and slept until the sun shining in his eyes woke him.

When he had showered, dressed and had breakfast in the dining room, he crossed the square to the Commissary. William and several troopers were busy sorting, unpacking and storing the supplies. He came over, his dark face lit up with a wide grin. "Well, do you want to hear the tally?" he asked Zach.

"Sure," he replied.

"Okay," he referred to his clipboard. "Two medium machine guns with five thousand rounds of ammunition. Ninety-three M-21 assault rifles with two hundred thousand rounds of ammunition and five hundred grenades. One thousand MREs. Two bazookas, laser guided and 28 rounds. Six sniper rifles, with scopes and a hundred thousand rounds of ammunition. Forty 9mm military issue side arms and ninety thousand rounds. Two hundred combat knives. Web belts, gilly suits, full uniforms in various sizes, office supplies and manuals for the weapons." He paused after reciting the litany of supplies and waited for Zach's response.

"Hey, man, what's the matter?" William finally asked, exasperated. "You were expecting howitzers?"

"Sorry, William." Zach answered. "It's impressive, but you know the Mahdists are going to come looking for this stuff. If it was just a few weapons, then they might make a cursory search and leave. But, this equipment could supply a major expedition and these guys are looking to expand. I just hope the false trail throws them off.

He took the clipboard and called a trooper over. "Write this down, please. The office supplies: send half of them to Gail at the school. Send one of the mediums to the Backdoor with sixteen full belts. Include about half of the MREs to store in the Cave. Take the other medium to the Fence and set up a position with overlapping fields of fire with the light machinegun that is

already there. Oh, and the bazookas should go there, too. Store them at the Ranch. That's all," he handed the clipboard back to William and dismissed the trooper.

"Issue the M-21s to active troopers, if they don't have them. I want every adult issued a weapon, rifle or pistol, and hold some classes to do a little training. We may have a war on our hands."

"Zach, you can't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders."

Crossing to the stables, Zach thought about what they were going to do if the Mahdists attacked. He knew that the small force they had would not be able to withstand a concerted effort. The only saving grace was the Mahdists did not seem to have a competent officer in a command position. Their arrogance and slovenliness pointed to political or familial appointments.

For the next two days, Zach prowled around the Fence and the Lookout located on a spur of the mountain with a view to the north and east. Just as he arrived at the Lookout, a plume of dust was visible in the east. Over the next hour a small caravan came into view. Zach immediately sent the lookout to alert the settlement and muster the troops and militia to their posts.

By mid-afternoon the caravan had arrived at the cache site. There were fifteen large trucks and a hundred cavalry. They immediately threw up a screen around the site and a troop of ten men rode towards the west. Half of the remaining troopers moved the wagons and began to dig in the disturbed soil. After a few minutes, they discovered that the supplies were no longer in the hole and the commander spoke with several of the men who began to circle the camp in ever-widening spirals.

They found the tracks leading north and reported back to the commander of the Mahdists and he led twenty-five men along the trail a few minutes later. A squad rode to the top of the Mound and set up an observation post.

At dusk, the first group returned with two led horses. Zach had released two of the draft horses to be found. He hoped that it would convince the Mahdists that the stampede was real and that a party riding in from the north found the cache later, excavated it and made off with the supplies.

By noon of the following day, the scouting party returned and reported. The commander slashed his boots with his riding crop and gave orders to his officers. Camp was broken, the observation post was dismantled and the Mahdists set back down the road.

The next morning, Zach sent Matt and his troop after the Mahdists on a distant, but parallel path. When Matt returned and reported that the Mahdists weren't returning, Zach breathed a sigh of relief. He slept well that night for the first time since they had raided the cache.

Chapter 8

Meeting with the Sioux

Summer 2041

I hope I wasn't too harsh with Jenny, but these people have to learn that we are no longer a modern society. We have dropped back to a tribal level and the women must be protected to assure the continuation of the tribe.

What a coup. The Mahdists had found a cache of weapons from the military. It would have given them a huge advantage in any conflict. The M-21 with grenade launcher, laser sights, built-in night, infrared and daylight scopes with .408 cartridges have upgraded our individual weaponry. The eight laser-guided rocket launchers will be assets if any of our enemies have light armor. We also showed that we can work together and Jim and Matt have shown great leadership abilities.

I feel I can leave without regret. I will look in on the settlement from time-to-time, but they don't seem to need me anymore. Tomorrow I will take Luther Smith and his troop out on a scout to the West to look at the potential for a roundup of the cattle that were spotted along the river. TJ says that the valley can support a lot more cattle. We will swing north and see if we can pick up the tracks of the Mahdists and, hopefully, follow them to the site where they found the weapons cache. There might be other gear that we can use.

On the morning of the scout, the sun burst over the horizon hot and bright. The wind hadn't picked up and Zach heard Luther order his troopers to take an extra canteen and a bottle of salt tablets. They were planning on

being on patrol for a week and three packhorses had been loaded with food for two weeks. There would be plenty, especially if they supplemented their fare with wild game.

The troop rode off amid a cloud of dust and Zach felt tension and stress slough off with each passing mile. He had grown tired of the politics that had sprung up in the settlement. This was nothing abnormal for a small community, but wearing, none-the-less.

After a two-hour ride, they took a break to brew coffee and rest their mounts. The horses were watered in a shallow creek and picketed. Zach noticed that the mounts were in good shape, no sign of careless handling or poor grooming. Their coats were sleek and shone with the evidence of constant brushing and currycombing.

As he was inspecting the animals, Zach noticed that Luther was pacing, just within his peripheral vision. It finally distracted Zach to the point he straightened up from inspecting a hoof for stones or mud and faced the young man. "All right," he said, "what's up?"

"What? Oh, nothing, really," Luther replied, quickly, turning a bright red to the roots of his thick, auburn hair. "Well, that is... I was going to ask you something."

"Ask away," said Zach.

"Um, I, ah, well, it's like this," he stammered, sounding like shy schoolboy asking a girl out on a first date.

"Come on, Luther, spit it out."

"Can you do marriages? I mean, can you marry people?" he finally blurted out.

Zach was amazed. This was the last thing he expected and he took a

second to answer. “Sure, as the JP, I can perform civil ceremonies. Pastor Simmons can perform a wedding, too. He would be able to perform a religious ceremony as well as a civil one. Why do you ask?” he finished, acting innocent.

“Jenny, you know, Jenny Scales, doesn’t like the Pastor. She says he gives her and the other girls the creeps. She wanted to ask me if you would marry us, if you wanted to, I mean.”

“I would be honored to perform the ceremony, but this is going to cause Simmons to have a fit. We are never going to hear the end of it. He is going to raise holy hell with the Council.

“Let me think on how to do it. The bans will have to be posted. And, how do your parents feel about this? Have you even told them?”

“Uh, I kind of hinted with my dad, but Jenny hasn’t told anyone that I know of.”

“Okay, I will make you a deal. When we get back, you see Andy and ask for his permission to marry Jenny. After you have done that and gotten everything official and Andy’s okay, I will speak with Pastor Simmons and come up with some excuse as to why you want to be married by me.

“What that is, I don’t know, but we will think of something. After the three weeks are up for the bans, the ceremony will be performed at the park or in the council chambers. You’re positive that you won’t have the Pastor marry you?”

When Luther replied that Jenny would never have it, Zach nodded. He ordered the troop to mount up and they headed west again. Zach shook his head and thought that the day had started so well and that he had better think about what to say to the Pastor.

Late in the afternoon, the troop reached the river where the draft horses had been kept the night of the 'stampede'. They had seen small groups of animals to the north and west as they followed the setting sun, but had not been able to close with any of them as they approached the river. There were several trails worn in the bank, leading down to the river bottom and they followed one.

The tall birch and willow thickets were oppressive, with no breath of wind stirring the drooping leaves. Luther ordered camp made and the troopers jumped to their chores, knowing that the river waited for them when they were done. An hour later, the playful shouts and the sound of splashing were heard as the troopers stripped down and enjoyed the water. They had found a deep pool and were making the most of it after the hot ride. Zach performed sentry duty while the boys played.

After the troop had turned in, the night was periodically broken by the sounds of breaking brush and the lowing of cattle coming down for a drink. By the time dawn broke and the troopers got up yawning and stretching, the sounds had died down. One and all complained about the lack of sleep and the hardness of the ground. Zach grinned from the hammock he had strung between two birch trees and commented that being prepared was the first rule of campaigning.

When they asked him why he had not told them to bring their own, he retorted that they had not asked. After a few grumbled, unintelligible remarks, the troopers scattered to wash and start breakfast.

Luther and Zach made a short scout on both banks of the river and found an abundance of evidence that cattle and buffalo could be found in large numbers. They discovered a spot where the banks narrowed to the south of

the camp. They could block the river banks at that point and start a drive north. They would look for a good spot to set up a gathering point when they broke camp and headed in that direction.

The sound of a shot sent them hurrying back across the river and up the east bank. They found that John DeLeon had brought down a young buffalo. While some of the troopers butchered the kill, Zach had the rest dig a pit. The bottom of the pit was lined with wood and a fire started. While the coals were forming, a square of hide was used to wrap up the hump and a shoulder, along with some wild onions they had found. When the coals were ready, a layer of rocks was laid in the center of the fire; the hide-wrapped meat placed on the stones and the whole thing was covered with grass, dirt and coals from the edge of the fire and a final layer of dirt.

The next hours were spent building drying racks for the rest of the meat, cutting the meat into strips and laying the strips on the racks. By the time the smoking process was well under way, Zach declared the hump and shoulder done and the improvised oven was uncovered and the smell of roast buffalo meat permeated the camp.

Early the next morning, the dried meat was packed and the troop climbed the bank back to the plain and headed north. A few miles on, they found a ford and Luther suggested that this would be the spot to block the river and move the collected cattle up to the plain where they could be driven back to the settlement.

Jacob Swan, who was riding point, waved his hat and motioned to the northeast where several buzzards were circling. Luther had the troop spread out in a skirmish line and assigned Eddie Burns to take the packhorses and hang back. The remainder of the troop advanced slowly, rifles in hand. They

topped a shallow rise and saw a downed horse. The rider appeared to be trapped, but alive. He was waving his hands at the bolder of the birds, which have landed on his horse.

“He must have been laying there for hours for the vultures to be brave enough to land near a living man,” Zach mused. He looked at Luther, who divided the troop in two and ordered one, under Tim Scales, to make a loop around the downed rider to make sure that there wasn’t an ambush waiting.

When Tim’s squad broke out of the copse of trees lining the crest of the rise, the vultures lumbered to fly and took off, squawking their displeasure at being disturbed from their lawful carrion. The rider froze and turned his head to follow their movements as they circle him. He raised himself on his elbows and stared at them.

After receiving the all clear, Luther signaled to Eddie and led his squad directly to the downed animal. The rider’s dusky skin, black hair and high cheekbones indicated his Native American ancestry. He directed his eyes to Zach, who sat his horse contemplating the man and wondering what this would do to the balance of power in the area.

Finally, after waiting for several minutes, the downed rider spoke. “You think this is some kind of a sideshow? Sorry, but I don’t do any tricks. Who the hell are you, anyway? This is Sioux land and you’re trespassing”

Zach tipped his hat back on his head and amusedly replied, “So, arrest us then.” He told Luther to free the rider. The troopers carefully excavated the soft earth around the man’s leg.

As they pulled him free, the man cried out in anger and pain and Zach saw that his left pant leg was bloody and the leg was sitting at an unnatural angle. They carried the man to the shade cast by the rise and Zach cut the

wounded man's pant leg, exposing the break and the jagged end of a bone showing through his skin.

“Old son, I won't kid you, but this is going to hurt getting it back together.

“Luther, I need some straight sticks, about two feet long. Cut a blanket into strips about two inches wide. Break out the first aid kit and there is a bottle of medicinal brandy in my saddlebags. Rig a cover from a tarp and boil some water.”

While Luther was issuing orders, Zach asked the injured man, “While we are waiting for the show to start, how about telling me something about yourself. Like who, where, what, when, how, you know, the news story questions.”

“How about a slug of the brandy, first. The pain is killing me.”

“I thought Indians were stoic when it came to pain,” said Zach as he opened the bottle and handed it over.

“If you were lying here with a broken leg, you would see such an example of stoicism it would amaze you,” he replied, applying himself liberally to the bottle. “Thanks. I'm Two Wolves of the Sioux Confederation. Like I told you, you're trespassing. When the country fell apart, the reservations weren't hit as hard as the cities. We lost about thirty percent of our population and decided that we got the land back by default.

“We formed a council of the bands from the reservations and declared a Confederacy. We laid claim to all of the land from the Snake River on the west, the Great Lakes to the east, north to the Hudson Bay and south to the Staked Plains and Texas. The members of the Confederation went through a naming ceremony and shed their white identities.

”That’s the thumbnail sketch.”

“That’s a sizable chunk of territory,” replied Zach. “Have you discussed rent with the Mahdists and the Fundamentalists and anyone else around?”

“Well, I said we claimed it, not that we have a presence in all of it. We thought that the claim was a start,” Two Wolves grinned.

Luther came back and reported that everything was ready and Zach asked him to cut a two-foot square of the horses hide and wash the inside with hot water to clean it off, since it was going to be the cast.

It took fifteen minutes to set the leg and bind it with the piece of hide. Zach used the sticks and blanket strips to keep it in place until it shrunk around the leg. Two Wolves passed out during the operation and they laid him on a pile of blankets and covered him with more. Luther had troopers sit watch with him with orders to let Zach know as soon as he woke.

Camp was set up and the carcass was dragged off downwind of the camp. Sentries were set and they settled down for the night. Two Wolves was restless with fever throughout the night, but it broke just before dawn. Zach sent out several troopers to kill a cow or buffalo and bring in fresh meat and the liver. He didn’t know if it would do any good, but he had heard that liver was good for blood loss.

Two Wolves was weak when he awoke, but managed to drink some broth. He was in pain with his injured leg and the improvised cast of horsehide. Two Wolves explained that he had been hunting and just enjoying a ride. He saw a coyote and was chasing it when his mount stepped in a prairie dog hole and broke its leg, pinning him under the horse with his own broken leg. He cut the horse’s throat when it was thrashing around and Zach

and his riders found him the next day.

Zach explained who they were and the circumstances that caused them to settle where they did. He went on to suggest that the settlers be allowed to stay in the Rocky Mountains and they and the Sioux form a partnership for trade and defense. Two Wolves told him of a group of Mormons around Salt Lake who traded salt and other products with them. As to the partnership, the Sioux explained that there were two factions within the Sioux Confederation. One was for maintaining peaceful relations with their neighbors, both Indian and non-Indian. The other faction wanted to expel or eliminate all non-Indians and actively search out any non-Indians in their claimed territory. This faction was small, but vocal and there had already been incidents with the non-Indians living near the Confederation Headquarters on the old Rosebud reservation. He stopped to think and was about to continue when a rider galloped into camp.

It was John DeLeon, one of the troopers sent out to hunt. He skidded to a halt, sending a cloud of dust over Two Wolves and Zach. Unconcerned with the discomfort his entrance had caused; he leapt from his mount and reported, "There are a dozen riders coming in from the north. I didn't get a chance to tell if they were Mahdists. I figured it was best to get back here as quick as possible."

Luther ordered the troopers left in camp to form a defensive position on the crest of the hill and they grabbed canteens, weapons and ammunition before sprinting to positions. Zach picked up his rifle and casually pointed it in Two Wolves' direction as he sat on his saddle facing north. Two Wolves saw the movement, smiled and lay back.

"If they are Mahdists, you could give me a gun and we could start that

mutual defense pact right now.”

“If they are Mahdists, get ready to catch,” Zach rejoined keeping his eyes on the growing dust cloud heading towards them.

The riders slowed when they spotted the camp. One pointed to the crest of the hill and the whole party halted. Two Wolves lifted himself onto his elbows and waved to the party of riders. Out of the side of his mouth he said, “Its Black Moon. He is the leader of the genocide party, but there are several others who are not on his side. Let me do the talking and we may get out of this without bloodshed.”

“Go ahead, but which one is Black Moon? I might as well have a target if shooting starts.”

“Third one from the left. He and his followers are the ones with paint on. It shows they are always at war. He is kind of an ass, though a dangerous ass all the same.”

Black Moon and the unpainted man next to him moved forward and halted at the foot of Two Wolves’ pallet.

“What happened, Two Wolves?” asked Black Moon.

Two Wolves told his story, making sure that his tone was loud enough to carry to all of the riders. As he spoke of being saved and the help that Zach provided, Black Moon’s scowl deepened and he interrupted the narrative.

“They are trespassers on our sacred land,” he spat. “They deserve to die.”

“Black Moon, don’t be such a jerk. They saved me and I promised them safe passage. Unless there has been an election and I got voted out of being War Chief of the Sioux Confederation, that promise holds.”

At Zach’s surprised look, Two Wolves’ lips built a small grin and he

glanced at Zach and gave a little head jerk as if to say, “It didn’t seem important at the time.”

Black Moon savagely yanked on the reins and he and his painted followers galloped off to the north. Two Wolves watched them ride off and, finally, said to Zach, “I am going to have to kill him someday. You, my friend, should stay out of his way.

“I will bring up your suggestions to the Council and see what comes of it. One thing you must be careful of, do not kill any buffalo. Take all of the cattle you want, but leave the buffalo alone. It causes a very bad gut reaction in the Confederacy.

“If you have any reason to meet, tie a red cloth to one of the trees on the hill up there. I will tie one to a tree on the mound, if I want to talk with you. Anyone I send to you will use the password “Sensible Things” to verify that he or she comes from me. I wouldn’t recommend that you send anyone to the Confederacy, since you might meet one of Black Moon’s men.

“Here, help me up.”

Zach helped him to rise and ordered Luther to bring forward one of the spare mounts and he presented it to the injured chief. His men transferred his saddle to the new horse and helped him mount. With a wave, they rode off to the north.

Rather than continue the search for tracks from the Mahdists, Zach ordered the troop to turn for home. They rode through the night and reached the valley as dawn was painting the plains crimson. After a few hours sleep, Zach called a meeting of the Council to discuss the results of the scout.

The Council gathered in the meeting chamber a little after noon. Because of the tales spread by Luther’s troop, most of the settlers also

crowded into the room. Zach gave his report of the possibility of a roundup and cattle drive and told of their meeting with the Sioux.

He suggested that three troops, including the auxiliary, be included in the cattle roundup. When he is questioned on why the auxiliary, he replied that the auxiliary troop needs some practical field experience and this would be an opportune time. Several members of the audience grumbled about putting the girls in danger and Zach, seeing that Jenny was starting to fidget, lectured them on the very reason for the auxiliary troop. He finished by saying the Council had to decide if they were going to support the auxiliaries or disband them.

William called for a vote and the motion to round up the cattle and use the auxiliary troop was passed. After recording the vote, he asked Zach to detail the meeting with the Sioux. Zach told the story from the initial sighting of the downed horse and rider to the parting.

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything to do about the Sioux. We will curtail any expeditions to the north and be careful when riding outside of the valley. I suggest that we establish a rule that no fewer than five members to any party riding out of the valley. And,” he finished, “I move that a complete ban be placed on killing buffalo. Like Zach says, we have enough enemies without making more.”

When he called for discussion, Pastor Simmons rose and said, “We cannot cater to these heathens. This land was given to white, Christians for their use. We took it from the Indian and it is ours. We should kill every buffalo we find and drive them out of our land for good.” He finished and looked around as if daring anyone to contradict him.

“Zach, how many fighters do you think the Sioux have?” asked Sven

Beckstrom.

“I would figure that, with what they said, they probably have several hundred. They can’t occupy the territory they claim, so their population is no more than a couple of thousand, all told. Even though they seemed to survive the plagues better than city dwellers, there were a good many deaths. Two Wolves said about thirty percent, plus more during the starvation period, I would imagine, despite what Two Wolves said.”

“Pastor, with all due respect,” Sven said, “it seems to me that we have over a thousand Mahdists who would love to see us destroyed. The Fundamentalists won’t find us friends, since we reject their brand of Fascism as much as the Mahdist’s brand.

“Now you tell me that you don’t mind adding to the numbers against us by stirring up the Sioux. Pastor, I think you are a fool,” he finished. As he became more and more agitated, his Scandinavian accent became more pronounced.

The Council voted approval of the buffalo-hunting ban and declared that anyone found killing the animals would be permanently exiled from the settlement. The meeting broke up and, as Zach was walking out, Luther stopped him and pulled him into a corner.

“You haven’t forgotten your promise, have you? You know, to marry Jenny and me.”

“No, I haven’t, Luther, but I still have to figure out how to do it without getting the Pastor’s shorts in a bunch.”

“I will speak to your father as soon as I can get him alone, though, and see what he says.”

Disappointed, Luther walked over to Jenny and they stood talking

animatedly. Jenny shot hard looks at Zach, who smiled back and left before she could corner him and give him a piece of her mind.

Chapter 9

Cattle Drive, Marriage Banns and Social Issues

Summer 2041

Looks like I will have a problem with Pastor Simmons not too far away. I have been approached by a trooper who wants me to marry him and his fiancé, Jenny. Simmons is going to have a heart-attack. I, personally, think he is a lecher, but there haven't been any real complaints. A few of the women don't want to be in the same room, alone, with him and others have expressed nervousness at how he looks at them.

Just when I thought we had avoided the Mahdists, we get a new problem with the Sioux. I like and trust Two Wolves, but Black Moon gives me nightmares. All we need is an all out attack by the Sioux when we aren't really able to protect ourselves. The new weapons will help, but we just don't have the bodies to win a war against the number of fighters they can muster.

The Council, at least, recognizes our difficulties. They voted to try and keep the peace with the Sioux and establish trade with the Mormons. We will take out three troops, several of the older men and the auxiliary for the cattle drive. I don't see there being any danger, yet, from the renegade Sioux and it will be a great exercise for all. I have noticed that the troopers at the lower barracks have been practicing roping with lariats.

I will leave Matt and his troop here, along with the four others. Matt will be in charge of the 'military', while I am gone. He has orders to keep a sharp watch and send a rider if there is any sign of a problem. The troopers will test fire the new rifles. I wish we had more ammunition. I told them to

save the expended cartridges to reload. Charlie Wright will make molds and lead shouldn't be too hard to find, but I don't have a clue on how to make powder or where to find the ingredients. I know you need salt peter, charcoal and sulfur, but in what combination? We probably should look into finding bows and crossbows, or making them, before we run out of cartridges. Our motto should be "Back to the Middle Ages and loving it."

Zach set the date for the cattle gather and assigned Matt to command while he was gone. He was instructed to keep everyone home and make sure they were alert. "I want The Backdoor defensive position to be completed and the Cave stocked by the time I get back," Zach instructed him. Zach also confided in William that he was giving Matt this opportunity to see how he handled command, but would appreciate it if William would keep one eye on the situation.

The cessation of patrols would free up needed manpower to the DeLeons for wood and coal gathering. Mike Stewart's troop was large enough to take over the guard duties and TJ had been asking for help with the llama wool industry. A new weaving shed had been started and the looms, carding boards and spinning wheels had to be finished and set up before the spring shearing.

The day before the cattle expedition was scheduled to leave, Alvin Young came up to Zach, accompanied by his wife and her sister. He took Zach aside; out of the hearing of the troopers he was supervising. The farmer was nervous and hemmed and hawed until Zach lost his patience, "Al, I have a lot to do before we take off in the morning. Its not that I don't want to talk to you, but I do have a lot to get done. Now, what is it you need?"

“You can marry people, right?” he asked and, when Zach assented with a nod, continued, “Well, I want to marry Grace’s younger sister, Victoria.” At Zach’s stunned look, he hurried on, “Her husband was a police officer and the Mahdists executed him. I, um, I have been taking care of her and her kids since then and, you know, I thought, well, we might as well be married, and all,” he finished lamely.

Zach lifted his hat and scratched his head. He looked at the sisters, so alike with long dark hair and olive complexions. Their dark eyes fixed on the two men with an anxious intensity. “Alvin, I don’t want to seem old fashioned, but won’t that cause family dissension? Have you two thought how this will affect Grace? And, we really don’t have a process for getting a divorce, anyway.”

Alvin looked alarmed and glanced around to make sure that no one was in earshot. He held up his hands in a defensive motion. “What are you talking about? I don’t plan on getting a divorce. Who said anything about a divorce? I love Grace and the kids. Are you crazy? I said I wanted to get married, not divorced.”

Zach furrowed his brows and stood there with a confused look on his face. Suddenly, it dawned on him. “You want two wives? Is that what this is about? We don’t have any provision for divorce and we certainly don’t have any provision regarding polygamy.” When Zach turned to the women and waved them over, they took each other’s hands and hesitantly approached.

Zach explained the situation as he saw it and asked the women to confirm it. When they did, his lips twisted into a wide, amazed smile and he told them that this was a topic for the Council. He assured Alvin and the women that he would present it to them at the first opportunity.

“You do realize that this will probably give Pastor Simmons a heart attack? He will have a conniption fit.” Zach walked away, laughing, to find the Council and put this new controversy into their laps.

Alvin looked at the sisters and said, “I think it will be okay.”

The women looked at each other as if they were sure it wouldn’t.

When Zach found William and explained what Alvin and the sisters wanted, he was at as much of a loss as Zach had been. His first thoughts were of the explosion Pastor Simmons would set off when this came to his attention. The other council members were rounded up and they sat down over one of the few remaining beers in the stores. As they passed the bottle around, the members discussed what effect bigamy would have on the community. By the time they had exhausted the matter and decided that a town meeting had to be called over something this important, Zach was looking forward to seeing the look on the Pastor’s face.

William grabbed a passing trooper and asked him to ring the bell for a meeting. A small, brass bell had been mounted in front of the courthouse, which was used to signal a meeting had been called. Several other troopers were assigned to notify the workers gathering wood and coal, herding the cattle and guarding at the Backdoor.

When most of the community had gathered, William gaveled for order and announced, “We have a request that the Council decided needed to be presented to the community for consideration. There looks to be a social issue. There is a man here who has found a young lady to wed; the only problem is that he already has a wife...”

“Divorce must never be allowed,” bellowed Pastor Simmons, leaping to his feet.

“Calm down, Pastor,” William said, banging his gavel. “No one said anything about divorce.”

Grumbling, Pastor Simmons sat amidst low laughter and giggles.

“What we are talking about,” continued the governor, “is bigamy.”

As if on a cue, Pastor Simmons sprang to his feet and shouted, “Never.”

“Pastor, I will have you removed, if you interrupt again.”

He glowered at William and threw his hand in the air, as high as he could reach.

When he was recognized, Pastor Simmons began a tirade about the sin of fornication, bringing up Sodom and Gomorrah, morality and, at one point, Bishop Hippo’s treatise against marriage by priests. By the time he had run out of steam, he had confused everyone on his stand and the topic he was addressing.

Several of the members of the audience spoke against the idea, but more felt that it was a matter of personal choice, as long as all parties were in favor. This brought up the matter of multiple husbands, group marriages and the whole question of the gene pool and diversity.

Andy Scales finally proposed a motion to table the discussion until the cattle drive was finished. The matter could be taken up after everyone had had a chance to think about it. The motion passed and the meeting broke up with lively discussions and joking going on as the crowd filed out.

The next morning, the last of the equipment was loaded into the wagons, farewells were said and the cry to head out started the four troops and the two wagons out of the valley and towards the west. Zach had Two Troop lead, each trooper paired with a trooper from A Troop. Four Troop, with the

rest of A Troop, rode at the flanks and Three Troop was split between the rear guard and the wagons. After the noon break, the formation was rotated and Zach made sure that none of the troopers from A Troop was assigned to the same trooper from Two, Three or Four Troops.

On the first night, George Petrie and Janice Dodge had to be separated. George had told her to get him some more coffee and Janice refused. Zach put a stop to it and informed everyone that A Troop was not there for the purpose of cooking, cleaning and serving. He rounded on the male troopers and scathingly read them the riot act about their attitude.

“And furthermore, for the rest of the expedition, Two, Three and Four Troops will be responsible for the camp chores. A Troop will be responsible for the nightly guard rotation,” he finished.

Gregory LaTour made the mistake of protesting that this wasn’t fair and ended up on Kitchen Patrol until the expedition returned to the valley. “You want fair, look somewhere else. This is not a democracy it is a dictatorship. I am the dictator.

“Anyone else doesn’t want to play well with others will also answer to me and I will straighten it out,” he finished, sweeping his glance over the crowd of troopers. “Jenny, meet with me in an hour to set up a guard rotation. Yancey, meet with me now to set up a duty schedule. Dismissed.”

Yancey, who had been appointed second-in-command, met with Zach and drew up a duty roster, which had the troops assigned to camp setup, food preparation and cleanup. The only exception was that Gregory LaTour was assigned to KP on a permanent basis. Zach warned him about fraternization between the male and female troopers. “I don’t particularly care what goes on at the Settlement, but we can’t have discipline break down when we are in the

field. Warn the boys that there will be severe, and I mean severe, punishment for any breach of conduct. Yancey, this means I could, and might, invoke banishment.”

The troop leader knew, from Zach’s tone and look, that this was not an idle threat and delivered the message with a stern caution to the rest. He took Luther aside and made sure that he knew that this meant him and Jenny, too.

When Jenny entered his tent, Zach had her go over the strengths and weaknesses of each of the female troopers and they created a guard duty roster, good until they reached the river. Zach gave her the same message he had given Yancey. He especially cautioned her about Luther and informed her that she and Luther were not to be paired during the march. He cocked his head when she started to protest and she snapped her mouth shut and gave him a terse agreement before leaving to set the first watch.

Early on the third day, Tim Scales and Donna White spotted cattle along a ribbon of green cutting through the plain. They had reached the river, at last. The wagons wound down the long slope to the river.

Nils found a campsite near where a small stream entered the river. The flow rose from a rocky formation several hundred yards from the larger body of water. There were several small trees clustered around the head of the stream that would supply shade and there was a level area for the wagons and tents. It was the turn of Two Troop to set up camp. Three Troop was sent downstream to locate a spot from which to start the drive and Four Troop was sent upstream to locate a good end of the drive. They were to make sure that the end of the drive was no more than three to four miles from the start and had an easy slope to the plain where there was grass and water available to the cattle.

Half of A Troop was assigned to patrol the far bank and identify, with the white cloths they were issued, any trail out of the river bottom. These would all have to be sealed to keep the drive pointing upstream.

Zach cautioned all parties that there were considerable downed trees, branches and dry brush in the river bottom and to be careful about fire. No smoking was allowed during the drive and the campfire site was to be kept well cleared of debris. "The worst thing that could happen is a fire. Not only would it kill or scatter the cattle, but there would be a good chance that some of the drovers would be trapped, too."

For the next three days the Troops were kept busy from sunup to sundown building barricades, chivying cattle into the river bottom and sealing the trails with brush and downed logs. At night they barely had enough strength to eat before crawling into their bedrolls to sleep. Dust got into everything and tempers grew short. Zach had to step between Paul Washington and Gene O'Malley to prevent a fistfight. He ordered them separated for the rest of the day and gave them extra duty. "Maybe that will make you too tired to fight."

On the morning of the fourth day the drive began. Zach and Two Troop began the sweep at the downstream barrier, but were forced to bring in Three Troop to help. Four Troop and A Troop flanked them on the bank, ready to throw any cattle trying to escape back down the banks. By mid-day, the river bottom had become a furnace and Zach ordered the troopers, one at a time, to trade places with the flankers.

Several of the old bulls tried to break back and Zach's line was hard pressed to stop them. Constance Gonzalez' horse was gored by one bull, which was killed by a fusillade of shots from John DeLeon and Grace

Santini. Constance escaped with scrapes and bruises, but Zach sent her back to the wagons for the rest of the day.

When night fell, they were only half way to the upstream barrier. Zach ordered a rough fence built with ropes and brush and assigned A and Two Troops to patrol the banks and fence. Fortunately, there was plenty of feed and water and the cattle settled down. The rest of the troopers made a cold camp on the bank and collapsed onto their bedrolls.

At midnight, Zach roused them to replace the night herders and mount a guard, which Zach had done for the first half of the night. After making the rounds and checking on the herders, Zach crept into his blankets and was asleep before his head hit his saddle.

When he awoke, he found that he was alone, except for the two drivers and Connie, whose right leg was swollen from the previous day's fall. She was grinning at him as he sprang from the ground, searching for his boots. She handed him a cup of coffee and said, "They thought you needed your rest."

Zach gulped the hot coffee, which was as much chicory as real coffee, burning his mouth. With a few choice words directed at his chosen mount, he quickly saddled and galloped away. Connie and the two troopers assigned to the wagons laughed and set about breaking camp.

The drive had gone on almost a mile from the previous night and, when Zach joined them, the troopers dealt out some good-natured ribbing about beauty sleep and references to his age. Zach was pleased that morale had seemed to improve from the previous day.

The cattle began to funnel up to the plain by the mid-afternoon and the drivers followed them about dark. Zach ordered the troopers to keep driving

the cattle, cutting out the few buffalo, if they could, for another hour to tire them out before stopping for the night. The stream they were following wended eastward, so they pushed the cattle alongside it.

Zach had ordered Four Troop to escort the wagons ahead to set up camp and have a hot meal ready when the herd arrived. The fire was a welcome sight to all and they circled the herd. Four Troop took the first watch while the rest of the troopers ate and went to bed.

Luther, while shoveling beans and rice into his mouth, commented, "I will never think the Old West was romantic again, if this is how hard they had to work for a living."

Zach allowed a late start the next day. In the morning, he kept the male troopers in camp to rest and repair gear or ride herd. The members of A Troop took towels and soap to a pool in the stream screened by trees and brush and scrubbed off the dust and dirt of the last two weeks. They returned with damp hair and shining faces. While they took over the herding duties, the rest of the troopers grabbed their toilet kits, fresh clothes and towels and the air was soon ringing with shouts and splashes.

After the noon meal, the camp was packed and the trail routine was followed until they arrived back at the valley. As they drove the docile herd into the mouth of the entrance, they made the final cut and drove the last of the buffalo north towards the Mound.

Zach glanced up and noticed that a man was sitting his horse on top of the Mound. Zach waved his hat and the man waved back. When Zach arrived at the foot of the Mound, Two Wolves met him and they shook hands.

"I see that you have kept your promise about the buffalo," the Sioux said, pointing to the small band grazing north. "That will sit well with the

Council and make it easier to ratify the alliance over Black Moon's protest."

"Good," returned Zach, easing himself in the saddle. "Anything to shut him up."

"Oh, you haven't shut him up, only killing him will do that, but you will make him look small at the Council. I would be careful, he will be looking for revenge."

"One thing at a time, old son, one thing at a time. We will keep a lookout, but we have to start preparing for winter soon. We have to fatten these beeves up and start drying meat, tanning the hides, harvesting and all, so we will be staying close to home for the next few months."

"Yeah, that's going to occupy us, too. Well, take care," said Two Wolves as he turned his horse and rode away towards the buffalo. A dozen other riders joined him and they pushed the animals north.

By the time Zach had ridden through the gap, the new herd had scattered over the lower valley, belly deep in stem-cured grass. The troopers were riding hard towards town, for a hot meal and a bed and to see their families. TJ rode over in the two-wheeled cart he always used. He insisted that you couldn't balance a bowling ball on a horse and that is the same effect he would have trying to ride.

The herder complemented Zach on the number of cattle and reported that the slaughter pens and smoke houses were nearing completion. "These critters will fatten up pretty quickly on this grass and will be ready to cull in a month or two."

Zach left him and rode up to the town, knowing that the Council would be meeting and want a full report of the expedition. He was surprised to find that the Council Chambers were packed, until he remembered that the

polygamy question was to be settled. He gave a quick report on the success of the drive, noting that they had gathered almost two hundred head, which TJ would look over and pick the animals to be slaughtered for winter.

William took the podium when Zach had finished and noted that the only question left open was the question of polygamy. The discussion that followed was heated at times, but it was finally agreed that, until the gender balance was more even, polygamy would be allowed. The only requirement was that the existing husband and wife and the proposed spouse were to be interviewed separately by the Council and all parties must be in agreement before the marriage would be allowed.

Pastor Simmons stood, after the vote was taken, and stated that he would not allow any polygamous weddings in his church and strode out. The Mills' followed him. The meeting was adjourned after a celebration was called for the following evening.

Several of the older bulls were slaughtered and roasted over open pits at the Ranch. A dance was held and William released several cases of beer and wine from the Commissary. During the celebration, the banns were read for the first time for Alvin Young and Victoria Swan and Luther Smith and Jenny Scales. The younger couple's parents were the first to call for a toast to the betrothed couples. The celebration carried on far into the night and more than one young couple was seen walking into the dark.

William nudged a tipsy Charlie Wright and pointed to Matt Busby and Janice Dodge with their arms around each other entering the barn. "Looks like the hay is getting a workout tonight, huh?" Both men laughed until they were forced to sit and catch their breath.

The next day, late, the town slowly came awake. Zach was sitting on

the edge of his bed trying to decide if it would be better just to shoot himself and be put out of his misery or to struggle into his clothes and head for the community diner for coffee and breakfast. Cooking for himself sounded like too much of a chore. A banging on his door did nothing to ease his aching head or improve his temper.

“Go away,” he shouted and winced at the shooting pains in his head.

The banging continued and Zach lurched to his feet, swearing never to drink again, and staggered to the door. He threw it open to face a belligerent Pastor Simpson. “I really don’t need this now,” he muttered, trying to shut the door. Pastor Simmons had stuck his foot over the threshold and was holding it open. Zach knew that only violence would get him peace and he didn’t have the strength for it.

“What do you want, Pastor?” he snarled, opening the door.

“I have just come from speaking with Luther Smith’s father and he informed me that the marriage ceremony between his son and Jenny Scales would not be held in the church.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Zach asked in a pained voice. “Take it up with the Smiths and Scales. Do it now and leave me alone.”

“I have spoken with both of them. I demand that you refuse to perform the ceremony and insist that you require them to allow me to marry them.” Pastor Simmons pursed his lips and assumed an attitude, which may have served him well on the pulpit, but only further irritated Zach.

“You pompous little ass,” Zach said. “Those kids can get married by a Druid or a Witch Doctor for all I care. If they don’t want to be married by you, that’s their choice. Just let it go!”

“And, no, I am not going to insist on anything. The reason we have a

Justice of the Peace is because you are such a jackass. Now, get out of my room before I throw you out.”

Simmons whirled and left the room without another word. His face had lost its color by the time Zach had finished and his body was stiff with anger.

“Crap,” spat Zach to the closed door. He knew that he had let his anger get the better of him and that he should never have said what he did. By the time he had opened the door, Pastor Simmons had disappeared from sight. “I’ll get dressed, have some coffee and apologize,” muttered Zach as he wrestled himself into his clothes.

Later, when he went looking for him, he found Pastor Simmons loading a wagon with supplies at the back of the Commissary. ‘Gramps’ Dewinne and the Tim Mills were loading another wagon. William was writing on a clipboard and greeted Zach as he walked up.

“Pastor,” Zach began, but was ignored as the Pastor stepped down from the wagon and began to help ‘Gramps’ lift a box to the back of the second wagon.

Confused, Zach climbed up on the loading dock and asked William, “What’s going on here, William?”

“We have three members of the community who are exercising their right to take a week’s worth of supplies and leave,” the big man answered, his dark face splitting into a wide grin.

“Tim, why? What is going on?” Zach turned to the young farmer.

“Pastor Simmons is unhappy,” he replied. “We don’t think you give him enough respect. It’s like you are always laughing at him and treating him badly. We figure on heading down to the Missouri settlements where he can

be appreciated.

“You’re heathens and, and sinking into sin and we don’t want any part of it, so we’re leaving.”

Zach looked at William, who shrugged and said, “They have asked for two wagons, horses and tack. A weeks worth of food, but I gave them some extra. It’s a long way. We had three .30-06 Mausers left with three boxes of ammunition, so I gave them those, along with clothing and a few tools.”

“I have mixed feelings, here,” whispered Zach. “The Pastor was a pain in the butt, but ‘Gramps’ is getting along in years and might not make the trip and I really like the Mills. They will be the real loss, but we can’t hold anyone here against their will, so...”

When the wagons were packed, they rolled out of town with no fanfare and it was several days before everyone knew that they had left. The general consensus was that the Pastor was no great loss, but the others would be missed. After a few days, the incident had faded from most people’s minds, but Zach still felt guilty that his words had triggered the exodus.

Chapter 10

Refugees

Summer 2041

Well, Simmons is gone. Good riddance. The only black cloud is that he will try and cause trouble between the Fundamentalists and us. What with the Fundamentalists, Mahdists and Black Moon's Sioux, this next year will, undoubtedly, bring a lot of interesting events.

The polygamous marriage didn't bring about any more controversy than Simmons' leaving. I figure people will let it happen to those who want to do it. Which reminds me, I have to talk to the Council about sending an expedition to the Mormon Territories. We need a peaceful neighbor, though 'neighbor' is stretching it a little. In addition, we can use some salt. I want to contact Two Wolves and ask him what he is trading to the Mormons. I hope it is cattle, because we have little else to trade that we don't need ourselves.

Luther and Jenny's marriage has started a round of courtship among the troopers. I guess they realized that the available pool of females was small. The Council will probably have to step in and decide on an age of marriage. It will have to be, at least, seventeen, since that is how old Jenny is. I would hate to see child brides. Kids need to be kids for as long as possible. I will have Cindy Smith talk to several of the girls who are taking to this like a duck to water. We may have to have dueling rules if several young men are interested in the same girl and she doesn't choose quickly enough.

Three weeks later Zach performed a double wedding. Both brides

were able to find white wedding dresses and the men looked uncomfortable in suit and tie, something not seen for a long time in the Settlement. Zach kept pulling at his collar and wondered if the constriction would cause permanent damage.

There were the usual criers and weepers in the audience, but what wedding didn't have those? The ceremony was well attended and Alice Sanders and Misha Burchinski made traditional wedding cakes with the last of the wheat flour. The reception was, as TJ put it, "another barn-burner".

William released several bottles of champagne, wine and the last of the beer in stock. 'Doc' White forbade the opening of any hard liquor, which Zach was thankful for in the light of the last celebration. Another, older bull was sacrificed for the feast and the surprise of having early-ripened fruit and cream made the party a huge success.

The evening was capped off with the shivarees and everyone went home satisfied. During the party, several other couples had approached Zach about getting married, but he told them that the office was closed for the night and come see him in the morning.

In the morning, while he was talking to several parents about announcing the banns for their children, a runner came from the Front Gate and announced that a Sioux wanted to speak with Zach and it was important. Zach excused himself, saddled his mount and followed the trooper back to the lower valley. A crowd had grown around a young Sioux named Buffalo Calf, who was showing signs of nervousness by the time Zach and his escort arrived.

When the Sioux refused to pass the gate, Zach ordered the crowd to give them room and asked a trooper to bring a couple of chairs and

refreshment from the Ranch. By the time the passwords were given and returned and introductions made, TJ's cart had returned with the chairs, a folding table and enough food to feed a hungry troop.

After the Sioux had eaten, Zach said, "Buffalo Calf, what does Two Wolves want?"

"There is some trouble and he wants you to meet him where you first met. He told me not to tell you anymore, but you should bring no more than a dozen men."

Zach thanked him and turned to a couple of troopers. "Find Matt and Luther. Have them assemble their troops, full kit and a week's supply of rations. And tell William that I want a hundred rounds of ammunition issued to each trooper." Turning to another trooper, he said, "Kindly tell 'Doc' that we may need him on this one and have a medical kit ready."

While he waited for the troops to assemble, he checked his equipment. He had his M-1 carbine in its scabbard and enough MREs for several days in his saddlebags, along with his pistol and plenty of ammunition. He was thankful that he always kept supplies ready for an emergency.

In less than an hour the troops had arrived, escorting 'Doc' and his field ambulance. They immediately set out through the Gap and pushed hard for the meeting point. Matt's troop was assigned to ride point and flanker. The rest of the troopers rode with rifles at the ready. Extra horses had been saddled and were ready if they needed to abandon the wagon and flee.

A mile from the meeting site, Matt sent back a runner. The trooper reported to Zach, "There are a lot of wagons on the other side of the slope. It looks like a lot of families, they're not Indian and there's some Sioux standing

guard over them. Matt says that he recognizes Two Wolves.”

Zach slowed the formation and ordered Luther to bring them on slowly and be ready to retreat if he heard three or more shots. Taking the runner with him, Zach then spurred ahead and crested the rise to see Matt’s troopers gathered to one side with Two Wolves. He ordered the runner to bring Luther up at the double and to come friendly, since there did not seem to be any trouble.

As Zach rode down, Matt waved him over and he joined the troop around Two Wolves. “I came as soon as I could, Two Wolves. Buffalo Calf said it was important.” When he had finished, he relaxed in the saddle and waited for Two Wolves to speak.

“Good to see you. We have a problem, Zach. Black Moon is on a mission to regain the stature he lost with our Tribal Council and the young men. He has gone on a crusade to cleanse the Confederation of non-Indians. He attacked several towns and ranches. He warned the inhabitants to leave our land in two days time. There have been several incidents and a couple of people have been killed and he has taken to burning your people out and leaving them in the cold with nothing.

“I sent some men to warn the remaining ‘outlanders’ and escort them here with what they can quickly pack. Several families refused to move and have sworn to fight it out. What you see here are those who agreed to move. We told them of your settlement. I hope you don’t mind, I couldn’t think of anything else to do on such short notice.

“Several groups have gone north to Canada, west to the Mormon settlements and east towards the Great Lakes and the Mahdists.”

“Damn,” Zach said in anger. “Matt, split your troop. Send half to the

west and the other half to the east and see if you can round up the strays. Bring them back here, if they want to come. Do not, I repeat, do not engage the Sioux. Run if you have to.”

Two Wolves broke in; “Take Buffalo Calf and Long Wind with you. They may be able to help if you meet any Sioux who are not with Black Moon.”

Zach thanked him and asked ‘Doc’ to see if the refugees needed anything.

“This is a bad sign, Zach,” Two Wolves confided. “I don’t want it to ruin things between us, but I can’t do much else to protect the ‘outlanders’.”

“What is this ‘outlander’ bit?” snapped Zach.

“Cool off, brother. I know that you are angry. I would be, too. ‘Outlander’ is the term Black Moon coined to refer to any non-Indian. I have gone to the Council, but they are split on whether to condemn or praise Black Moon. I won’t start a civil war, either, no matter how much I disagree with this ethnic cleansing.

“I will protect and try to save those I can, but I won’t destroy what we are trying to build here.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Thanks for doing what you have done. We just have too many enemies and I was hoping that your people and mine can, if nothing else, live in peace,” Zach said.

“Well, I managed to bring out about two hundred souls and there should be more coming in when your men finish their sweep. You will need to speak with these people. There are several who want to grab guns and start a war, which neither of us wants. I have relieved them of their weapons and put them in that wagon over there,” Two Wolves said pointing to a wagon

sitting off to the side and guarded by several Sioux.

Zach moved towards the refugee wagons and called for their attention. After introducing himself, he said, “The brutal truth is that you have been evicted. The Sioux have created a Confederacy of Tribes and we aren’t part of it. Grumble all you want, but that is the long and short of it.

“Now, you have several choices. The Mahdists are to the east. You can join them, become Muslim, join their army and help establish a Caliphate. You should realize that you will live under Shari ‘a law and anyone who is a politician, in law enforcement or other proscribed positions will be killed. Boys aged fifteen or older will be impressed into the military.

“To the southeast are, what we call, the Fundamentalist settlements. They are, in one form or another, theocracies. Their rule is an interpretation of Biblical law. I don’t know much about them, but I heard from some who have had first-hand knowledge that they are not really tolerant of non-whites or Catholics and Jews.

“There was a colony of Israelis which fled Israel and was given a stretch of land in Florida. I don’t know anymore about them, but to get there you will have to travel through Fundamentalist or Mahdist territory.

“To the west, the Mormons have re-established Deseret. We don’t know much about them, except for what the Sioux have told us.

“I don’t know what is to the south. The Sioux claim the land, but they haven’t enough population to hold it, at this time. Others may have taken up residence there. Remember, there was a huge wave of Hispanics, which the Border Scouts tried, unsuccessfully, to stem. I also have no idea what is happening in the northwest or northeast.

“Two Wolves told you about us. We are a group of families who have

settled in the town of Mitchell. The Sioux claim that, too, but have agreed to let us live there. We are trying to form a mutual defense treaty with them against the Mahdists and, if it comes to that, the Fundamentalists and any other danger. There is plenty of room for you. We have a simple set of laws, based on the Old Constitution. You can leave anytime you want. Any questions?"

A rough looking man in his late thirties with a three-day old growth of beard and angry eyes shouted, "Yeah, I got a question. When do we get our guns back and start shooting?"

Zach looked at him and replied after a moment, "You will get your guns back once everyone who has some sense decides what they want to do. After that, when my troopers and I are gone, you can commit suicide in any fashion you desire."

The man muttered and was shushed by a short, stout woman standing next to him.

"If we join you," another man asked, "what happens to our property? Do you have land for us to farm?"

"We have set up a communal society. Not because we are Socialists, but because this world has devolved back into a tribal society. Your personal possessions are still yours. We have a Commissary for what we scavenge that supplies what is needed to members of the Settlement. Any animals will be put in with the common herds. There is some land already in production, but we need help there, too.

"There are, around, two hundred cattle in the lower valley. Our ranching expert raised llamas before joining us." This brought a ripple of laughter from the crowd. "We do have a farmer, a sheep man and tradesmen

who can work with wood or stone. We are short a vet, miners, lumbermen and experts in a lot of areas. To show how desperate we are, I am the military commander and I haven't ever been in the military." Again there was a ripple of laughter at this self-deprecating comment. "If you know of a military man, please shove him forward."

"Who runs things?" a woman shouted from the back of the crowd.

Zach laughed and said, "We all do, ma'am. There is a Council, which has provisions for expansion as we get more people joining us. We have a Governor and a bench of judges. I, myself, am the Justice of the Peace. If any of you join us, we will create more Council seats and you will elect representatives to fill them.

"One thing you need to know. The troops you see around you are examples of our military. Most of them have escaped from the Mahdists and we had several run-ins with them while doing so. They hate us and will keep looking for us. Every able-bodied man is part of the militia. Boys can join at fifteen, but are required to join at sixteen. There is a girl's auxiliary troop, but there is no requirement that they join, its all voluntary. But, realize this. The Mahdists have the same requirements and the Fundamentalists, also. I don't know what the Mormons have, but there is a force there called the Dannites.

"The reason that the boys are in the troops is that we, as a community, can't afford to lose the knowledge of the older men. This is a brutal world, ladies and gentlemen, understand that. There is no policeman to protect you, no government to protect you. There is only you and your fellows to do what protection is needed.

"Now, my troopers will be leaving in the morning. Anyone who wants is welcome to join us. Those who want to go their own way, well, we

will leave you your weapons and belongings and good luck to you.”

The next morning, Zach took a count of those who are going with him to the Settlement. Several families of Mormons were determined to head west and settle in Deseret. One family wanted to head to the southeast, where they had family in Missouri.

At noon, Zach led out one hundred and eighty-two refugees towards the Settlement. The cattle and sheep were driven ahead. Luther’s Troop was split and the twenty-five military aged youth were divided between them. One Troop herded the animals and the other formed flanking and rear guards.

They traveled late into the night with only brief stops for food and to fill the water barrels at springs and creeks. After a three-hour break for food and rest, Zach roused the refugees at 2:00 am and they started again. By early the next afternoon, they reached the Gap. Zach had sent a rider ahead to alert the Council and a large welcoming committee was waiting for them. Each of the newcomer families was assigned to a someone who would take them to the Settlement and help them find quarters.

Two days later, just as Zach was contemplating taking out several troops, Matt and his half-troop returned with eleven wagons, horses, cattle and forty refugees. These were assigned quarters and there were many joyful reunions between separated family members and friends.

The next evening, Gary Christensen and the rest of Matt’s Troop arrived. Several of them were wounded in a running battle with Black Moon’s followers, though none seriously. They brought in eight wagons and thirty-one more refugees.

Zach proposed a town meeting for the next evening to introduce the newcomers and determine the next steps that would be taken to incorporate

them into the community. William agreed and the word was spread.

Chapter 11

Meeting

Summer 2041

We have just doubled our population. The Dakotans are a welcome addition, with the farmers and ranchers. I wonder what the outcome of the next elections will be. I want to intermingle the two groups to avoid cliques. It will be fairly easy to integrate the troops. We will have enough troopers to increase the strength to ten men and a leader. The number of adults is still out of balance and we will have to re-address the polygamy question, with all of the new opinions.

We just got rid of Parson Simmons and up pops a new sky pilot. However, Father Tillford, a Catholic priest, seems to be a little less dogmatic than Simmons. He and his sister have taken up residence in the 'rectory' and he will conduct services on Sunday.

A real surprise is Ed Johnson. He had a small ranch on which he raised, in his words, 'vast herds of nothing.' His three dogs had to be introduced to each member of the community, since he had trained them as guard and attack dogs. He is retired military, Special Forces. He received a medical discharge after he damaged his back during a parachute jump. We tried to get him to take command, but he insisted that he would only advise, so I have an aide. He will be forced to take over when I leave, however.

The situation with the Sioux is very troubling. When Two Wolves dies or is overshadowed by Black Moon, I expect that there will be trouble from that direction. This fledgling civilization is being pressured from so many

directions that I am afraid that the eventual result will be disaster. Maybe, I can find a new location for the settlement, farther away from the Mahdists, Fundamentalists and Sioux. Of course, the farther south we go, the closer we get to the Hispanic regions.

Before communications broke down, there were stories about the invasion from South and Central America. A lot of them died fighting each other and whatever border guards we had in place at The Wall, but there were too many to keep out entirely. It would be a sad twist of fate if we escaped from the local troubles and ran into new ones. I wonder if this was how the migrating tribes of the ancient world felt – no matter where you go, there is someone else there to contest it. And can you hold the land or do stronger tribes shove you farther away?

That is pretty much what we have devolved to – a post-industrial tribe. What weapons we have will be obsolete when the ammunition runs out or they break down and there are no new parts. I will suggest that the scavenging parties look for bows, crossbows, swords, spears and other primitive weapons. We should start experimenting on their manufacture before we need them. Charlie Wright may have time to forge arrow and lance heads and, maybe, swords.

Now that we have more troops and home defense militia, it's time to send out an expedition to the Mormon Settlements and see what kind of trading we can do with them.

We need salt, if nothing else. We have had some success with the llama wool and, with the addition of the Dakota sheep, we might have viable trade goods. The Schummers have completed the first sheerings and are starting to card the wool. We have made a good start on having the wool

making equipment copied and set up spinning and weaving operations.

The poultry farm has been a little disappointing. There have been several incursions by ferrets or weasels or minks and about half the flock has been killed. Hopefully, the dogs, which came with the Dakotans, will fit the bill as guards for the chicken pens. The pigeon house has been completed and is high enough to be safe from varmints. I am hoping that they can be used as messengers between patrols, expeditions and all.

Rafael DeLeon and his sons have found a small deposit of coal and the Council put them in charge of winter fuel. The DeLeon's have also been testing out fat lamps made from the fat of slaughtered cattle. When the pigs, also from Dakota, have increased to the point where they will be a meat source, they can try pig fat as lamp fuel. The best hope we have is to find an oil deposit and try to get kerosene from it. Not that anyone here has any idea how to do this.

If left to their own devices, I have the utmost confidence that these people will be successful in building a new civilization. If left to their own devices.

During the week prior to the meeting, quarters had been allocated, with plans on expanding the Ranch to accommodate several of the newcomers who were ranchers. Willing hands helped the newcomers get settled. Shops were opened to accommodate the tailor, electrician, leatherworker/tanner and plumber.

On the Sunday following the arrival of the refugees, Father Tillford preached a sermon. The themes were unity and encouraging a sense of community. The congregation felt that it was a relief after Parson Simmons'

tirades on sin and condemnation. His sister, Emily, a quietly understated woman with a plain face that transformed when she smiled and bloomed into real beauty, played the small organ and the hymns were of a joyful nature in which even the musically-challenged joined.

A hog ranch was established in the upper valley on the site of the funeral pyre. The scraps of partially burned wood were hauled off and a mud pit and troughs were quickly built. The dozen or so sows and three boars were released into the large pen. The children were cautioned about staying away from them, since they would attack with little provocation.

There were a significant number of farmers among the newcomers and there was talk of planting winter wheat. The flock of chickens was released into a new series of coops that had been strengthened to make them varmint proof. The dogs that came with the newcomers would, hopefully, be an additional protection.

Ed Johnson wants to train guard dogs, when the bitches start having litters. They would be invaluable in the future. He has started writing a training manual for cavalry, mounted infantry and ground infantry. Part of his belongings included reloading equipment and he could manufacture gunpowder, if he had the correct ingredients.

The meeting was well attended and William called it to order and welcomed the newcomers. The first order of business was the make-up of the Council. "With the addition of all of these new citizens, the Council felt that we should dissolve the current government and elect a whole new slate. One of our last proposals is that the number of voters to representatives should be changed from 20 to 1, to 50 to 1. This will make for a more manageable number of council members.

“Under the current rules,” William continued, “we would have twelve council members for our current population. Any discussion?”

When no one spoke, William called for the vote and the change was accepted.

The next order of business was to discuss the division of the town into four districts, using the Ranch as a fifth. “Candidates will register with the Justice of the Peace.” William said. “Zach, why don’t you show the good folks the map you worked up for the districts?”

Zach stood up and tacked a large map of the town onto the board set up at the side of the platform. “We did a census for each occupied house and came up with a plan for the districts. After that we just drew borders to evenly divide the voters. We used streets as the boundaries, rather than cut through a block. We included a, roughly, even number of unoccupied houses in each district.

“Our thoughts were that we could add any other newcomers to these areas, spreading them out evenly until the next election cycle and the districts are redrawn.

“As to candidate registration, I have an office on the next floor, number 203. There will be a secretary to take your name and district. We will have a candidate night for each district the week before the election and you can question the candidates from your district to your heart’s content. Any other electioneering will be your own responsibility. The election will be held in three weeks. Thank you.”

William called on Zach again to speak on the subject of the troops. Zach introduced Ed Johnson as his second-in-command and detailed his military record. He set up a chart showing the expansion of the number of

troops to ten, with three of these made up of auxiliaries. The commanders would be taken from the existing troopers with newcomers assigned as second in command. When there was a murmur of protest, Zach explained that the existing troopers had training and experience and the newcomers would be assigned their own troops to command, when and if they proved themselves.

Several of the newcomers protested their sons and daughters being required to participate in the military. Zach explained that, with the small population and the many threats they faced, everyone would be included in military service. A heated argument ensued and it was finally decided that, if the community were attacked, everyone would be expected to actively defend it. Those who were eligible for enrollment in a troop, but did not want to serve in a military capacity, would be assigned non-military duty, including wagon driver, medic or any other task as needed. Anyone who refused to serve in any capacity would be offered transportation and two weeks of food.

When William asked about new business, Gail O'Malley rose and reiterated her demand for a regular school curriculum she wanted to know when textbooks and supplies would be acquired and who would be assigned as teachers to help with the influx of new children. William called upon anyone in the audience with teaching experience to rise. Several men and women stood and, when William asked if they would be willing to act as teachers for the school, they all agreed. William thanked them and asked them to contact Gail after the meeting and pointed to a corner where Gail would be waiting.

“As to the acquisition of supplies, Zach will address that topic. Zach?” William called on Zach one more time.

“The Council and I have been speaking of this off and on for the last

few months. The nearest major town is Rawlins. We hope to contact any citizens and set up a trading agreement or bring them back with us, if there are still people there. If not, we will, not to put too fine a point on it, loot what we need and bring it back. I propose to take six wagons, four troops, one of which would be auxiliaries, Gail and several other teachers to evaluate what we find. If there is no discussion, I would like to bring this to a vote.”

There was a question about the inclusion of an auxiliary troop, but, after Zach assured him that they would be relegated to guard duty, the vote was called and the expedition was authorized.

Zach continued, “The next order of business is the formation of an expedition to the Mormon Settlements. I would like to send one troop to, sort of, introduce us and establish trade. We have some items, which we can part with from the Commissary, cattle and some samples of the cloth Mary Schummer and her weavers are producing. Our stocks of salt are getting low and the Sioux have told us the Mormons have a steady supply from their evaporation works. Since they have a long way to travel and the condition of the roads is unknown, I propose that they use a pack train. We have extra horses and they can sell the excess. Any questions?”

The discussion was short, since everyone saw the need for the expedition. Someone suggested that Ed Johnson or Zach lead the expedition, but Ed excused himself, saying he couldn’t ride with his back the way it was. Zach insisted that Matt had the experience to command the expedition and that he, Matt, would be the leader. With no more discussion, the motion was passed.

When William called for any other new business, one of the newcomers stood and asked about an expedition to punish the Sioux. Several

voices were raised in support, but the motion was voted down by a wide margin.

Zach met with Matt the next morning and they worked out the details for the Mormon Expedition. They would take ten packhorses and get the goods from the Commissary and the weavers. In the end, they decided that they wouldn't take any cattle, but if any were found on the way and it seemed feasible, they would herd them along. One of the items was a cage of three homing pigeons with which to send messages back to the Settlement. Zach warned Matt that he could expect no help if he ran into trouble, but any news would be welcome by the troopers' families.

The morning after the meeting, Stan Borders and Sean O'Hara stopped Zach. They asked if they could join the expedition to the Mormon Settlements. It turned out they were Mormon and wanted to relocate. Zach said that it is up to them, but they would have to take packhorses instead of wagons, if they wanted to travel with the troop. There was some argument about their goods, but Zach was adamant about it. No cattle, no wagons if they wanted to travel with the troopers. They finally agreed and departed to get their things packed. They took the packhorses and additional supplies as compensation for their wagons and bulky goods. They were assured that their belongings could be stored in an unused house until they sent word back about what was to be done with them.

Afterwards, he met with the troop leaders from Four, Five and Seven Troops. He explained that they were to have their troopers ready to leave in two days. They were to spread their equipment and supplies over the four wagons, so the loss of one wagon wouldn't have the potential of leaving them in dire straits. Each trooper was to carry one hundred rounds of ammunition

and a weeks worth of rations. Another three hundred rounds per trooper and two weeks rations were to be packed, along with the camp equipment. They would set out at 3:00 am.

When he met with Jenny, she was excited to be included and promised that her troopers would be ready, though she rolled her eyes at the departure time. Zach gave her the list of ammunition, supplies and equipment for which the Auxiliary troop was responsible. He instructed her to work with the other troop leaders and make sure that everything was squared away.

His final meeting was with Gail O'Malley and the other two teachers who rounded out the complement for the expedition. With her usual efficiency she wrote down his instructions and marched her colleagues away to collect what they needed for the trip.

Several days before the expeditions struck out, Zach met with Ed Johnson, Matt, William and the Council for a final briefing. Ed assured him that the troops remaining would be sufficient for the defense of the Settlement. William, as Quartermaster, handed over a list of items that he wanted them to pick up. The list had been compiled by Charlie Wright, 'Doc' White, TJ Schummer and several of the newcomers and consisted of twelve pages. William assured Matt that they didn't expect him to bring it all back and it was prioritized.

Chapter 12

Expedition to Rawlins

Summer 2041

Interesting happenings. Things got just a little more complex. We have a faction, which wants to mount an expedition and start a war with the only ally we have, the Sioux and another which doesn't want its sons to fight. Pacifists, in this day and age! We are hanging onto our lives and civilization by our fingernails and there is a group that doesn't want to defend it. Fortunately, only one of the youngsters let their parents talk them into sitting out. They do have a good argument, one son is serving in One Troop, the Scouts, and they want to keep their younger son at home.

Now I have a demand for teaching supplies. We are going to mount an expedition to Rawlins, through miles of hostile country to get pencils and paper. The only encouraging thing is the willingness of most of the refugees to join in on the program.

We have experienced farmers and ranchers to tell us the difference between a pumpkin and a potato and which end of a cow to brand. There are enough hands to help with the chores and the sheep will add a new item to the menu and supply wool for clothing. Warm clothing will be a necessity, soon. Winters this high up can be brutal and we will need all of the firewood and warm clothes we can get.

So, I suppose, the trip to Rawlins is not only for paper and pencils. I am hoping that a town that big will have plenty of houses with supplies and shopping areas, which haven't been completely looted. My biggest hope is

that the bows, crossbows, knives and projectiles will have been overlooked.

The expedition to the Mormon Settlements will leave at the same time as we do. Their trip will be a lot more dangerous. They will be cutting new trails through territory we know nothing about. The homing pigeons may give them confidence, but I don't know what we can do if they encounter trouble. Hopefully, they will send one when they get there, just to let mom and dad know they are safe.

The night before the expeditions set out, Zach met with Matt, again. He told him that he had three tasks for the expedition to the Great Salt Lake. The first was to map the route for populations, both friendly and hostile, and look for any refugees. Any people that he decided were friendly and looked like good candidates for joining the Settlement, he could send back. His second task was to look for a better location for a settlement. If he did find such a spot, he was to send a pigeon with the location, followed by a trooper to lead an advance party to the site. There were too many enemies surrounding them at their present location. Lastly, he was to establish trade and communication with the Mormons. He also told him about the two Mormon families that were going with them.

The day of departure found the members of both expeditions yawning and looking bleary-eyed. The wagons and packhorses had been driven to the Ranch the day before. Matt and his troops shook hands and there were tears in the eyes of several of the women who had gotten up to see their sons and daughters depart. The boys and girls were laughing and joking with the excitement of the adventure. Zach hoped that they would be as exuberant when they returned.

He assembled his four troops and the wagons and set out immediately. They rode north to I-80 and west towards Rawlins. There were several uneventful days with the exception of the teachers acting as chaperones for the troopers, much to the disgust of the younger members of the party. Curtis' troop learned their scouting maneuvers under Zach's tutelage and the expedition shook out into a comfortable formation.

A day out of Rawlins, one of the forward scouts reported the sighting of the taller buildings of the town. They moved slowly down the hills to a copse of trees, where they set up a semi-permanent camp. Zach left the teachers, auxiliary and one troop at the camp and took the other two, on foot, to the edge of town that night.

They camped in several deserted homes, after clearing out the bodies. There was evidence that a small battle had occurred, the walls pock-marked with bullet holes and scattered brass cartridges. Before dawn, the troops spread out and leapfrogged forward.

There was the smell of smoke, an unpleasant odor as they reached the center of town, where the business section stood. There was a wide, burned area around the business and municipal district. They spotted a sentry on the rooftop of the bank and, after scouting around the business section, saw several more. They weren't alert, one dozing on the coping around the flat roofs, another smoking. One was reading, with his rifle propped beside him.

Curtis pointed out a dead area between two sentries. There was an outside door in the building between the two sentry posts. When the one guard, who was pacing his post, moved off, the space between the houses they were hiding behind and the door was not visible to the other guard, the reader.

They timed the sentry's movements and determined that there was a

three-minute window from the time he disappeared from sight until he returned. Zach said that he would cross first and signal only when he wanted to have another trooper cross. Curtis was responsible for making sure the coast was clear and Zach gave him his watch to help him time the sentry.

Zach took a silencer from his pack and screwed it into the muzzle of the sniper rifle, inserted the 20-cartridge clip into the receiver and sprinted across the open space to the door. When he reached it, he gently tried the handle and was relieved when the knob turned silently. He motioned for another trooper to join him and then another, when the first reached his side. Zach gave a stop motion to Curtis to make sure he didn't send anyone else and turned back to the door.

Zach again turned the handle and slowly pushed the door open enough to peek inside. The room was a storeroom, with boxes, mattresses, old furniture and shelves stacked with paint and miscellaneous supplies. He motioned to the two troopers to stay put and tested the floor with his left foot. There was no creaking as he put more weight on the floor and he slowly entered the room, testing each placement of a foot.

Crossing the room was a slow operation, but he finally reached the door on the opposite side. Here, he repeated his cautious testing of the door and peered around it to spot a row of mattresses on the floor in front of a counter. The room was the lobby of the hotel. It had a staircase on the left, under which was a door with a padlock. Straight ahead was a double door, opening onto the sidewalk and a corridor stretched to the right, having a row of doors on each side. On one of the beds was a man, snoring, with his arm around a buxom brunette, who was also asleep. There were two rifles leaning against the wall.

Zach moved quietly into the room, motioning to the two troopers behind him, without taking his eyes off the sleepers. When they had entered the room, he motioned one of them to watch the stairs and the other to watch the corridor. As the trooper moved to the corridor, he stepped on a loose board and the sound woke up the male. As he opened his eyes, Zach shot him, twice, in the chest and shot the woman in the head. He angrily turned to the trooper, who was looking sheepish. He whispered to him to be more careful and for him to signal Curtis to send three more troopers across. When they had arrived, he assigned one to the corridor, one to the front door and the other to back him up, and then he turned his attention to the locked door. He saw a key hanging on a nail in the doorframe and tried it in the lock. When it snapped open, he removed it and released the hasp. Trying the door, it swung open and he was stunned by what he saw. The room had 15-20 women in various stages of dress. They were sitting or lying on mattresses. They all had a hunted look about them, which changed to fear and hope as they recognized him as a stranger.

When one of them started to speak, Zach put a finger to his lips and motioned her out. She wrapped a dirty blanket around herself and padded out of the room on bare feet. Zach whispered and asked her what was going on. She replied that there was a gang of reavers who had taken over the town. They used the women in the room and they didn't know what had happened to the men and children, who had been taken away. She introduced herself as Sarah Mitchleson and begged him to take them away from here. She said that there were six women in the diner, cooking and they would have to be saved, too.

Zach asked how many reavers there were and she bitterly replied,

“too many”. Zach grew impatient with her and scolded her for her flip answer. She apologized and said there were about forty men and twelve or so women. Some of the women were as bad as the men. She became more comfortable with Zach and looked around. Sarah gasped when she saw the two bodies and slowly turned her head and stared at Zach. He informed her that they had been about to give them away. She reassured him that she would have done it herself, if she had had the chance.

The other two troopers had entered the room and Zach sent one back to motion for three more men. He realized that this building would have to be a defensive position, because of the need to protect the women.

Sarah said that most of the reavers were out of town on looting runs and there were only about ten or eleven and the women left in town. Zach figured that there were six guards on the rooftops, which left five or six around town. The women were, probably, in the diner across the street or with the men, taking a siesta.

When asked, she admitted she didn't know where in the hotel they stayed, but it was usually on the next floor up or the ground floor.

Zach summoned three more troopers and sent one back to inform Curtis of the situation. Curtis was to keep one squad on the other side of the cleared area, in case Zach and his party needed to beat a hasty retreat. Zach whispered to each of his troopers that only under extreme circumstances should they fire their rifles and under no circumstances would they fire their launchers. He made a mental note to see if silencers could be manufactured.

He motioned two troopers to follow him down the hall, instructing them to quietly open the door and stay out of the line of fire. The first two rooms were empty, but the third had a man sleeping, with his arm over his

eyes. The man was dressed in dirty jeans, a tee shirt and leather boots. Zach tiptoed to the bed and slammed the butt of his rifle into the man's forehead. He, then, motioned to one of the troopers and, after checking that the man was still breathing, laid him on the floor, hog-tied him with the curtain cord and gagged him with a couple of socks they found on the floor. As they finished, the man groaned and tried to touch his head.

Zach whispered to the trooper to watch him and hit with his rifle if he tried to move or make any noise. Zach and the other trooper moved down the corridor. One other room was occupied and Zach shot one of the two men as he woke up. The other was given the same treatment as the first man and he was dragged to join the other captive.

Returning to the lobby, Zach and two troopers mounted the stairs, easing up each riser. They completed the search of the upper floor without finding anyone else. Back on the ground floor, he told Sarah to get the women ready to move. When she told him that few of them had clothes, he told to her get clothing from the rooms they had searched and do it fast.

While they were getting ready, Zach had a trooper cross back to Curtis and tell him that he was sending the women over and to have two troopers take them back to camp and have the camp get ready to move and move fast. The two troopers were to bring back the troop left at camp and have Jenny take charge there. By the time this was accomplished, Sarah had the women dressed and ready to go. They spent the next twenty minutes sending the women across and emptying the hotel. Sarah and five other women were armed with the weapons they had found during their search for clothing.

Zach positioned three troopers in rooms overlooking the main square

of the town on the second floor and one at each end of the upper corridor as lookouts. Three more were positioned in rooms at the front of the hotel on the lower floor, the rest he took with him to interrogate the prisoners.

“Everyone else in the hotel is dead,” he started brutally. “You can be, too. It’s entirely up to you. I’m going to ask you questions and the first time I even think you are lying, I’m going to kill you. Understand?”

The men stayed sullenly quiet and stared at Zach in defiance. Zach smiled and untied the legs of the first captive. Troopers held and spread his legs. Still smiling, Zach slammed his rifle butt into the man’s crotch.

“Understand?” he asked again and the men quickly nodded. “Good, now that we understand each other, I will remove the gag. It must be pretty unpleasant, two dirty socks.” When he removed the socks, the man started to speak, but quickly went silent when Zach tapped him between his legs with the rifle butt.

“That’s better,” Zach said. “Now, how many others are in town? There are three that we can see on the rooftops, two dead men and one dead woman in the hotel and you two. So, how many are left?”

The man blinked, realizing that the smiling man bending over him was not joking and not one to trifle with. He swallowed twice and cleared his throat. “There should be two more guys on the roof, a couple of more and the women over to the diner,” he said.

“When do the guards change?”

“What time is it?” the man asked. He hastily said, “three o’clock”, when Zach widened his eyes and broadened his smile.

“Thanks,” Zach said as he stood and ordered several troopers to tie and gag him again and stay and help stand guard. He threw one a roll of duct

tape and told them to make sure that both were secured and their mouths taped.

Zach climbed the stairs to the third floor and approached the ladder to the roof as the trap door opened. A pair of legs appeared and the guard was calling out as he descended, “Where the hell are you, Porkbutt? You should have relieved me fifteen minutes ago, you piece of – What?”

He had spotted Zach at the bottom of the stairs and, when he attempted to swing his rifle on him, Zach shot him twice in the stomach. The body pitched down the stairs and landed at his feet. Zach kicked the rifle away and turned the body over to check for a pulse and other weapons. The man was dead, but he found a .38 snub-nosed pistol and a hunting knife, which he removed.

He called down in a low whisper for a trooper to join him and replace the sentry, walking the perimeter. Zach followed the trooper up the ladder and started to crawl to the lip of the roof when another trooper stuck his head through the opening and told him that there were two bikers crossing the street towards the hotel. Zach reversed his course and hurried to the ground floor.

He motioned his men to hide and took a quick look through the door and saw two men in animated conversation step up on the sidewalk. The one on the left was tall and wore a long coat over jeans and boots. He carried a small caliber rifle and wore a dirty cowboy hat over his greasy hair. The other, shorter man had a shaven, bullet head with no neck, a jean jacket covered with gang symbols, a blue tee shirt, jeans and high top tennis shoes. He was armed with a sawed-off shotgun and an automatic tucked in his belt. Both had long hunting knives in sheaths on their belts. Zach debated trying to

put a fresh magazine in his rifle and decided against it. He calculated the number of shots he had fired and came up with around ten. He hoped that the silencer would still be effective.

When the men, still talking, stepped into the lobby, Zach and the troopers stepped out and covered them. One started to draw the pistol in his belt, ignoring the rifle in his hand, but froze when he realized that he was under half-dozen guns.

“Drop the hardware, gentlemen,” Zach said, “and put your hands up.”

The two men looked at each other and complied. “Who the hell are you?” asked the taller man.

Zach smiled and replied, “Just a tourist to you fair town.” He told two troopers to bind the men’s hands behind their backs. He had two other troopers bring chairs and pushed the two men into them. “Now, let us have a little discussion, shall we? Those two didn’t want to talk to me, neither did the other five here. I hope you two are more social.”

The taller man looked nervous, while the shorter man looked stubborn.

Zach addressed his first question to the latter, “Where is the rest of your gang?”

When the man replied with an obscenity, Zach shot him in the chest. He turned to the other man, who sat white-faced staring at his partner.

“This is how it works, I ask you a question, you answer. If you answer it truthfully, you live; any other answer and I shoot you. Dead. You understand the rules? Good. Now, where is the rest of your gang?”

The man licked his lips, took another look at the bodies in the room and said, “Out north of here, getting supplies.”

“When are they supposed to get back?”

“Tomorrow. They’re going to come back tomorrow.”

“See, that wasn’t too hard, was it? The women at the diner, do they have any weapons?”

The man nodded and said, “They have a couple of pistols, that’s all.”

Zach told two of the troopers to take the biker to one of the empty rooms and watch him. He was not to be untied, no matter what. One asked what about letting him go to the toilet and Zach said, “Let him pee his pants.”

Zach left two troopers on the ground floor and two on the upper floor to watch for any other reavers who came to the hotel. He cautioned them to try not to shoot, as that would alert the others. He ordered Curtis to stand by the back door and bring the other troopers to the hotel. With the two troopers guarding the prisoner and the one on the roof, he had twelve men to support him while he tried to take out the remaining guards and the diner.

They left the hotel by the end window and skirted the back of the buildings until they reached the one on the far side of the square, where the last alert guard was stationed. On the way, he ordered five troopers under Sergeant Ricardo Gonzales to cover the back of the diner, but under no circumstances were they to enter.

Zach’s group climbed in the window of the store atop which the guard was patrolling, climbed the stairs to the second floor and located the ladder to the roof. Zach knew he was going to have to take a chance on opening the trap door, but he hoped that the guard would be looking for his replacement. Before he climbed the ladder, he replaced the silencer and swapped out the partial clip for a full one.

Careful not to make any noise, he eased the trapdoor up and saw the

guard lighting a cigarette with his back to him to protect the flame from the light breeze. Zach eased the door fully open, laying it down on the gravel roof and climbed half out of the opening. The guard turned and casually flipped the match off the roof and glanced in Zach's direction. He froze, unbelieving, at the sight of a stranger with his finger to his lips and a rifle pointed at him. He started to swing his gun up and Zach cocked his head in warning. The man hesitated and seemed to relax. Then he swung his weapon around and Zach shot him twice. Before he fell, Zach was through the opening and onto the roof, aiming his rifle at the reader across the square.

The man was still reading, but he looked up and took a quick, casual scan around the other rooftops. When it dawned on him that something was subtly wrong, he closed his book and stood up. As he reached for his weapon, Zach shot him through the head and he dropped without a sound. Of the other two guards, one was asleep against a chimney and the other was gazing off to the north. Zach shot the latter, then the sleeper.

Zach gave the thumbs up in the direction of the hotel and descended the ladder and staircase to the ground floor. He ordered his troopers to follow him, sending one to tell Gonzalez' group that they were going to hit the diner.

Zach exited the store and walked up the sidewalk, hugging the storefronts. When he reached the diner, he saw that it had picture windows on either side of the door. The windows were set two feet higher than the sidewalk and there was a small space between the window frames and the door. Light curtains covered the lower half of the windows. Zach crawled under the window on his side of the door and stood up behind the space between the window frame and the door. He signaled Simon Milner to do the

same on the other side.

When Simon was in place, he peeked through the door and saw that the reaver women were sitting at one of the tables playing cards and talking. The rest of the women were in the kitchen area. Zach wiped his hands on his shirt, took a firm grip on his rifle, nodded to Simon and shouldered through the door. He moved to the left and Simon followed him in, with the rest of the troop in tow.

The women, dressed in a semi-uniform of black leathers, froze. Zach had Simon cover them while he moved in and, each in turn, had them stand and be searched. A fat woman with a pock marked face started to grab at him and he shot her in the leg. The rest settled back in their chairs and placed their hands on the table, as instructed. Zach disarmed the wounded woman and the rest caused no trouble.

The women in the kitchen huddled behind the counter until one; a small brunette raced around and savagely stabbed a tall, skinny biker, repeatedly in the torso.

“Hold it,” Zach yelled. When the women continued to stab her victim, Zach fired the pistol he had just taken from one of the prisoners into the floor at her feet. The woman jumped back and stared at the bloody knife in her hand, like she had never seen it before.

Gonzalez and his men in burst through the back door in answer to the sound of the shot and the women in the kitchen screamed in panic. Zach motioned them to step out into the dining room. The five women moved out in a group to stand near the wall as far from the prisoners as they could get.

“We heard shots,” Gonzalez said.

“Yeah, we had a little trouble here. Have two of your men get to the

camp and return here with the wagons and everyone. We might have today to empty the place out.

“Simon, find some rope and tie the prisoners up and take them to the hotel and put them with those other guys. Make sure that there are at least four men watching them.

“Josh, get up on the roof and take over guard duty there. Milt, you and Gary and Don get up on the other roofs where the guards were and keep an eye out for the reavers’ return. Make sure that the bookworm is dead, before you go on that roof. Take two or three men with you to back you up.”

He ordered three troopers to search the diner side of the square, three to search the courthouse and police station and three more to search the south side of the square. They were to look for supplies and survivors. If they found anyone in the jail, they were to report it before they letting out.

“We have to work fast, gentlemen, I don’t know when the rest of this crowd will be back and I want to be done before we have any unpleasant visitors. Now, move.”

By this time, the third troop had arrived and Curtis brought them to the World War II Veteran’s memorial in the center of the square. Zach told him of the plans and ordered him to try and block the streets to the East, West and South sides of the square. He planned to meet the returning reavers with only one entry point to the square, if possible. The hope was that they would be long gone before then.

With sufficient men, he reinforced the guards by doubling their number and assigned the rest to help gather food, clothes, weapons and anything else they thought the Settlement could use. Each member of the expedition had been given a copy of the Council’s list.

Soon after, the wagons, Jenny's auxiliaries and the women from town arrived. Zach ordered the wagons to be positioned at key points around the square for loading and had Jenny take the women and her troop to help with the scavenging.

Gail O'Malley asked Sarah where they could find school supplies. She found a map in the variety store and pointed out the Elementary, Middle and High Schools. The three teachers, with several troopers, set out. Sarah offered to show Gail where the High School was.

After they set off, Zach began inspecting the piles of supplies his troopers had been emptying from the stores. The diner had a large stock of canned goods, which were being loaded into a wagon, along with pots, pans, dishes and utensils. The grocery had been emptied of food, but yielded up a quantity of paper products, utensils and miscellaneous, over-the-counter medical supplies. The sporting goods store had binoculars, archery supplies, knives, camping equipment, and hunting supplies, excluding guns and ammunition. Other stores revealed clothing, medical supplies, bedding, furniture, toys, stationary and a treasure trove of other supplies.

Zach ordered them to load all the food, clothing, medical supplies, stationary supplies, archery equipment, weapons and ammunition from the reavers and archery equipment, first. After that, if there was any room, they would load as much into the wagons as possible.

While he was overseeing the looting of the town, a rider tore up the street from the High School and skidded to a stop in front of Zach. He was Todd Spires, from Stephen Young's troop. "You hafta come. To the school," he gasped and then threw up.

After Zach calmed him down, Todd explained that they had gone into

the school and it smelled like rotten meat. They had followed the smell to the indoor swimming pool and it was filled with bodies. The rest of the town's population had been taken there and killed.

Zach ordered the prisoners to be brought to him and he asked them what had happened at the school. They denied having anything to do with it and blamed it on their leader. Ropes were tied around their necks and Zach rode to the school, towing the prisoners, followed by the four troopers assigned as guards.

As they rode into the schoolyard, Gail met them, her eyes red from crying. She simply pointed to the pool house, at the east end of the building. Zach dismounted and tugged the reluctant reavers towards the door. As they approached, the smell became unbearable, but Zach shoved through the doors and stepped up on the pool deck. He looked down on the bodies, which were haphazardly stacked in the pool. Blood seemed to cover them. Zach, without looking at them, tugged the prisoners to the edge of the pool. He finally turned to them and called them animals.

The fat woman who had been wounded in the leg in the diner, spat at him. White-faced, Zach pulled the Webley and emptied it into the woman's body. He continued to pull the trigger, even after the gun was empty. Sarah finally came to his side and gently pushed the gun down. She took his arm and led him from the building.

"Get wood," he told Ben hoarsely. "Get a lot of wood." He pointed to the prisoners, "Make them do it. And don't let any of them escape, not one."

He turned to Sarah, "We don't have time to bury them. You understand that, don't you?" She nodded and put her arm around his waist

and laid her head on his arm. He didn't move while she cried quietly. Gail came up, put her arm around the weeping woman's shoulders and led her to a bench on the playground.

Zach chose five troopers to go through the school and haul out text books and supplies and stack them up in the school yard. The boys hurried off.

Zach stood rooted to his spot, watching the prisoners carry loads of wood and dump them in the pool on top of the bodies. One of the women started to complain about splinters, but quickly shut up when Zach tilted his reloaded gun in her direction. By the time the pool was full, the wagon had been loaded with text, reference and library books, along with whiteboards, markers, globes, wall maps and other teaching aids and miscellaneous items. While this was going on, Zach had several troopers return to the square and get fuel out of the motorcycles parked in front of the hotel. When they returned, he had them place the fuel cans at the edge of the pool.

The next morning, before they left, Zach would douse the pyre and light the building. He imagined how the fire would ignite with a whoosh. When they left, there was complete silence, except for the creaking of leather and the sound of the horses' hooves on the tarmac.

Chapter 13

Revenge

Summer 2041

Animals, utter and total animals. This is what the world has degenerated into, but these kinds of animals won't allow it to rebuild, if they are left alive. We have a good haul of supplies and equipment. The wagons, women and the Auxiliaries are going back. The rest of us will get revenge and cleanse this filth from our world, if we can.

When the troopers got back to town, it was obvious that the others had been told what had happened. Curtis reported that the wagons had been loaded, but there were a lot of stuff that they couldn't fit. Zach told him to leave it and call everyone but the sentries to the square. By the time they had gathered, Zach had selected the balcony of the hotel as a gallows and ropes were set up. Each was wound in a traditional hangman's knot and the prisoners were sitting on horses with the ropes around their necks. Without a word, he nodded to the troopers standing behind the horses and they slapped them. The bikers twitched for a minute or two and then quietly hung there, swaying gently. Signs, which said "Rapists" and "Murderers" were hung around their necks.

"These animals killed most of the citizens of this town; men, women and children. They terrorized the survivors. They don't deserve to live. Their gang doesn't deserve to live. Their kind doesn't deserve to live. We hung these pigs and we are going to wipe out the rest of them when they

return. Anyone who doesn't agree with me can go with the wagons. They will start back with the townswomen, the auxiliaries and the teachers."

Bob Zimmermann raised his hand and Zach nodded to him. "Sir, if you can find someone else to drive the wagon, I'd like to stay and help." The other drivers nodded in support. Gail climbed onto the seat of the first wagon and Sarah did the same to the second. Richard Sikes, the third teacher, went to the second wagon and pulled out a shotgun and three boxes of shells. He sniffed, rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb and said, "I can't shoot too well, but, with this, I don't imagine I would need to."

"This isn't fair," said Jenny. "I want to stay, too. Let some other troop escort the wagons." She dismounted and stood in front of Zach with her fists on her hips.

"What about Luther?" he whispered so only she heard. Louder he said, "Jenny, we have talked about the need to protect you girls so we can continue the Settlement. I don't want you to die here. I know that all of us want to help revenge the townspeople, but we can't afford to lose one of you."

Jenny quietly climbed on her horse, tears trickling down her cheeks. She told Carol Costler to drive the last team and they pulled out of town through the barrier on the west side of town. Sarah turned and waved at Zach as she turned out of sight.

Zach shook his head and turned to Curtis. "I want three men on the rooftops on each side of the square, but I don't want it to look like there are more men than they left here. I want them to figure that everything is safe, until we unleash on them. Ricardo, your squad will be in reserve in the square. Build a barricade facing the east and man it. You will be responsible for any who get past us. Take the teamsters and Mr. Sikes with you."

He turned to the third troop leader, “Sergeant Peacock, I want you to set your squad at the barricades at the east, south and west sides of the square. Tell your men not, I repeat, not to leave their posts, no matter what is happening, elsewhere.”

Shouting for all to hear, he said, “Everyone, get plenty of ammunition. Don’t waste your shots and do not fire your grenade launchers into the square or any buildings, without my express permission. This will be a no quarter battle. No prisoners, period.

“Now, get some rest and something to eat. We don’t know when these pigs are getting back and I want us to be ready.”

Zach prowled the defenses throughout the night, reassuring the nervous, but determined troopers and sowing encouragement. After a last round, he lay down in the hotel and slept for six hours.

He was awakened by the sunlight streaming through the window. After splashing water on his face and using the bathroom, he made a round of the sentries on the roof. As he was climbing down from the last rooftop, Mike Sullivan called him back with, “They’re coming.”

Zach hurried to the parapet at a crouching run and used his binoculars to study the riders coming from the east. In the same crouching run, he went to the square side of the roof and called down a warning to the men below. Returning to Mike’s post, he tried to spot the leaders, but the distance was too great. Finally, after a few minutes, he saw a fat man, wearing only a vest, jeans and boots, with a WWII Nazi style helmet on his head. He was at the head of the pack. There were around thirty other bikers behind him, then two pickups and a large box truck. Trailing were eight to ten other bikers. Zach figured that some of the bikers were women.

As they came within fifty yards of the southern end of U.S. 287, Zach lined up his scope and sent three shots into the chest of the man he thought was the leader. He slewed into a slide and four other bikes piled up behind him. As the caravan stopped, Zach shot through the windshields of the vehicles and the troopers in and on the buildings opened up on the milling crowd.

The bikers wheeled their motorcycles and scattered to the far side of the burned out area, leaving ten or twelve of their fellows behind, sprawled on the ground. They regrouped and unlimbered their weapons. There were still nearly thirty of them and they were mad.

With a roar of engines, they swooped down the road, trying to overwhelm the defenders with numbers. Zach had told the troop leaders to hold their fire until he started shooting. He let them get to the point of the first attack and drilled the lead rider. Their formation was loose enough to save those following from spilling. When the first rider fell, the rest of the troopers opened fire, dropping several of the bikers.

The attackers began firing at the buildings and thundered into town. A rope had been strung across the road. It was yanked taut and spilled the first row of riders. Gonzalez' men opened fire and the next line were smashed down. They kept firing into the melee as long as any were moving. The survivors turned and rode out of town.

Zach had instructed the troopers on the rooftop to fire grenades when, and if, they were driven off. Only three or four survived the murderous attack and escaped from the town. Zach picked them off with his sniper's rifle before they could get across the burned area.

A quiet settled over the scene and a southerly wind blew the smoke

away. Slowly, the defenders began to rise from behind the barriers. Zach called down to check on the pile of riders in the square and shouted for Ben to take his squad and check on the reavers outside of town.

When he got to the street, Ricardo reported that they had found eight wounded among the carnage at the street corner. He curtly told him to shoot them or hang them and walked to the center of the square where the casualties were laid out. Among them was Richard Sikes, who had caught a bullet in the throat. There were three other troopers dead and five wounded; none seriously.

Ben sent a trooper back to report that the only biker still surviving was the leader, who was dying. Zach mounted a horse and rode out to where Ben was directing his men to gather weapons, transfer what fuel they could from the bikes into the trucks and drive the vehicles to town. When Zach dismounted, the fat man groaned and opened his eyes. He looked up at Zach.

“Who are you, guys?” he gasped, weakly.

Zach didn’t say anything, just drew his pistol and shot the man in the head. He sighed, told Ben he was doing a good job and rode back to town, where he found the wagons and the Auxiliary troop waiting. Jenny was sitting on her horse and defiantly stared at him, but he just nodded and walked past her.

Curtis found one other of his troopers dead in a room of the hotel. Ed Yu was carried out and laid with the other dead. Curtis had ordered graves dug in the lawn in front of the courthouse and their dead were laid to rest. The bikers were piled outside of town and a sign was painted on a sheet of plywood saying, “Here are the bones of the Murderers and Rapists of Rawlins.” It was nailed to two 4 X 4 posts and set up on the road to town.

The journey back to the Settlement was delayed in order for the wounded to rest, the fuel to be gathered from the reavers' machines and the trucks to be loaded with additional supplies that Zach had thought would have to be left behind. They were also able to salvage two ATVs, which Zach figured would be handy at the Settlement.

That night, Sarah knocked on Zach's door. She entered at the irritated, "What?" Zach was sitting up in bed, his pistol in one hand and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with the other. "Sarah!" he exclaimed, dropping the weapon and clutching the bedclothes around his chest. "What's wrong? What are you doing here?"

"Please, come. Ruth Spencer just killed herself. She was the pastor's wife. Oh, we should have kept a closer eye on her. Come on."

Zach pointed to his clothes and the door. Sarah gave him an exasperated look and left. Zach could hear her pacing the floor as he hurriedly flung on his clothes. Still buttoning his shirt and with bare feet, he joined her in the hall. Without giving him a chance to ask questions, Sarah turned and sped to a room at the other end of the hall.

A crowd had gathered in front of the door, whispering among itself. "Back to bed, everyone," Zach ordered, shoving his way through to the door. He turned and made shooing motions with his hands as he repeated his order, snapping at the sentries to get back to their posts. The crowd broke up and Zach entered the room to see a body on the bed, with Sarah, Simone Vogel and Peggy Watson standing over it.

There was a glass of water on the bedside, half-empty, and several pill bottles. Zach touched the side of Ruth's neck to feel for a pulse, but the coolness of the skin told him what he needed to know.

“When?” he asked. Peggy, mopping her face with the sleeve of her robe answered, “She was quiet all evening and she prayed a lot. I came to bed first and didn’t hear her come in. Why would she do this, Sarah?”

“She just gave up, baby. What those animals did to her was harder for her to bear, I guess. And hearing about her husband being murdered like that, well, she probably couldn’t stand it any more. She is peaceful, now and we will have to pray for her.

“Can you and Simone help me with her? We need to get her dressed and ready for, well, you know.”

Zach left the three women and roused out Luther Smith, the watch officer, giving him orders to detail troopers to dig another grave. He was satisfied when Luther didn’t ask any questions, just nodded and strode off. Zach knew he had made a good choice in giving him command of a troop.

After returning to his room and climbing into bed, Zach lay awake for a while, thinking about the events of the last few days. He knew that they had been very lucky and it worried him. They couldn’t count on lazy sentries, late replacements, crazy suicide charges and a perfect killing zone every time. Critically reviewing his tactics on the first day, he found minor flaws, but they had seemed sound. However, as to his emotional reaction leading to the actions of the second day, he was ashamed of himself. He had no right to involve the troop for his own personal feelings. He had criticized the Mahdists for their ineffective leaders and he had followed their lead. If the bikers had come in from different directions or through the buildings, there would have been a harder fight and more casualties. In the middle of these thoughts, he fell asleep.

Chapter 14

Homeward Bound

Summer/Fall 2041

Casualties, casualties. How am I going to face Caitlin O'Bierne? She lost her parents to the plague and, now, her brother to a bunch of animals. I am going to turn the military over to Edwin Johnson and get out of here. I wonder if every commander felt this way afterwards. How could General Grant, during the American Civil War/The War of the Confederacy, face himself in the mirror?

We have a lot of supplies to add to our stores. We gathered additional weapons, but the calibers and types are all over the map, with the exception of the shotguns. We have gathered up all the ammunition we could find but, except for shotgun shells, there is a lack of ammunition. We picked up all of the spent brass we could, but I don't know what we will reload them with. There were a couple of cans of black powder and we can scrounge lead, but we don't have molds and the other equipment we will need. I will ask the Council to arm one of the troops with the bows and see if we can get them proficient. Maybe Andy Scales, Mike Stuart or Charlie Wright can tool up to put out arrowheads, spearheads, etc. I know I have made a note of this before. We will have to experiment with different kinds of wood for the shafts. Hopefully, there will be some usable references in the books that Gail O'Malley loaded.

I want to send another expedition back to Rawlins to get the stuff we left before another pack of reavers shows up.

Winter is coming on and we still have to gather enough coal and firewood to keep things warm. The foodstuffs from Rawlins will keep starvation at bay, but we will need another expedition to get more cattle. Andy was almost done getting a smokehouse built for the meat and some of the Dakotan women have experience in canning. Of course, a lot depends on the size of the harvest.

The troops moved out the next morning after the funeral. Curtis Dodge's Four Troop was detailed to screening duty. Luther Smith's Five Troop rode point and Stephen Young's Seven Troop was the rear guard. Jenny Scales' A Troop was interspersed among the vehicles. Gail O'Malley and Paula Tesh were in the second wagon, digging through the books they had salvaged from the school libraries.

Zach was moving up and down the line, like a skittish cat. He checked in with the wounded, stopped by the rear guard, cantered to the point guard, then spoke with Gail. He avoided the trucks, which had the Rawlins survivors, because he was nervous around Sarah Mitchleson. He was trying to analyze his feelings, but stopped short of an admission that he was interested in her. After all, he was pulling out for the Rockies soon.

He kept the ATVs close to the train, because they were so noisy that they would alert anyone in the vicinity that they were coming. He had had Four Troop patrol beyond the sound of their engines.

The journey was marred by an argument between Jenny and Luther. No one knew what it was about, but Luther slept with his men, that night, leaving Jenny the small tent. The situation continued the next day and Zach dropped back to talk to Luther, where his troop had rotated to the rear guard.

“How is it going, old son?” Zach asked. He got an affirmative grunt in reply. He tried again, “That good? All peaceful, is it?” He got another grunt. He and Luther turned aside and he dismounted. Luther remained rigid on his mount. “I can pull you off that thing, you know, or you can get down on your own.”

Luther dismounted and stared down the road. Zach shrugged, “Look, I understand that you and Jenny are upset. I’m upset. Losing friends is hard, at the best of times. Don’t interrupt,” he continued, waving Luther to silence, “I know what the two of you are feeling, death, at your age, is terrible. Your job, Luther, is to comfort her at times like this. You two should be made stronger... What is it?” he asked at another interruption.

“It’s not that.”

“Not what?”

“Not the deaths. Jenny is pregnant!” Luther blurted out.

“Okay, I must be missing something. You’re upset about her getting pregnant? You should be happy. Listen; there is a lot of female stuff going on, her body changing, hormones... What?”

“I’m not the one who is unhappy; Jenny is.”

“I am way too old for this,” Zach muttered. “Why is she upset? She doesn’t want the baby? Is she afraid of raising it in these times? Doc White is a good doctor; he’ll make sure she gets plenty of rest and the best of care.”

“That’s what she is afraid of,” Luther started, but Zach interjected. “She is afraid she will get the best of care?”

“No, no, let me finish, okay?” Luther snapped. Zach put up his hands even with his shoulders, palms out in a surrendering motion.

“She is afraid that you will take her troop away from her, after all of

the fighting she did to get it. And she's afraid that it will be different after the baby is born. She won't be able to be part of the troop," Luther ended miserably.

"Hmm, I don't think that she will want to be part of the troop, with a baby to care for. That shouldn't be a problem. About her losing the troop, she will. Even if I don't stop her, Doc White would have a cow if she kept on riding. It wouldn't be really good for either of them. I suppose you told her that she was grounded?"

Luther nodded. Zach shook his head, "Well, you have learned your first husbandly lesson. Be very careful when you give your wife orders. Only do it when she won't mind and when it is about something she would have done anyway. Even then, don't get too high on your horse or you will spend a few nights on the couch.

"Get back to her and apologize, even if you are in the right. You will have to learn to apologize. It restores the peace. Tell her that you will leave it in Doc White's hands and you will abide by his decision," Zach finished, slapping Luther on the shoulder.

Zach stopped by Gail's wagon on the way back to the front of the train and was disconcerted to find Sarah helping her sort books. After a short, uncomfortable silence, Zach told them about Jenny's condition. Gail looked from Zach to Sarah, har-umphed and told him to send Jenny to her. "Oh, and take Sarah back to her wagon," she ordered, when he was turning away.

Over Sarah's protest, Gail insisted and Zach helped her off the wagon onto the rump of his mount. She leaned away from him, with her hands on her knees, but clutched him to avoid falling off when he spurred away. Smiling, she slid her hands around his waist and leaned into him, pressing

against his back. She mouthed a silent “Thanks” to Gail. By the time they had reached her wagon, she insisted that she didn’t want to be cooped up and offered to ride with him.

She borrowed a horse from a trooper in A Troop and rode with him for the rest of the morning, slowly drawing him out. Before too long, they were talking away. At noon, they sat together and continued talking, without touching their food. Gail and several others of the women noticed and giggled like schoolgirls.

The weather turned wet and cold, presaging the onset of fall. Fortunately, the majority of the trip followed paved roads and the caravan was not slowed greatly. By the time the train had entered the valley, Zach and Sarah were inseparable and Jenny and Luther were sharing the same tent again. Zach calculated from the time of the wedding and confided in Sarah that this was one of those short-term pregnancies for which the first child is known. “As Plato said, ‘The young are never patient’,” laughed Sarah.

A large crowd formed when they pulled up to the Commissary. Zach had Curtis ride ahead and report to the Council about the action and let them break the news to Caitlin. Even though he felt like a coward, he was relieved that someone else was telling her.

The ATVs were turned over to Mike and Andy, who thought that they were pretty useless. Rather than use them at the upper sentry post, they argued that horses would be quieter and, probably, faster, considering the terrain. They regretted the use of valuable fuel to drive them all the way back here. Zach walked off, muttering about never doing them any favors again.

The general supplies were unloaded and the school supplies were taken to the house that had been renovated for a school. William informed

Zach that after the supplies were stored and the members of the expedition were fed and had cleaned up, the Council wanted to have a meeting and hear what happened, officially. As an aside, he suggested that Zach had better a couple of wives, if he kept bringing back more marriageable aged women. Obviously, he had heard the stories about Sarah, too, but Zach was completely oblivious to the thrust and walked away thinking it was a pretty funny joke.

At the meeting a few hours later Matt gave a brief outline of the expedition. Then Zach rose and praised the dead and injured members, especially Richard Sikes. There were some rumblings when he admitted that they could have escaped before the reavers returned, but the Council agreed with his assessment that they would have followed the train and that would have endangered the women and supplies.

Zach hid the guilt he felt. He had come up with that rationalization after the battle. He had decided on the ambush in Rawlings on pure emotion.

He called for another, immediate expedition to gather the supplies they had left and to do a more careful search of the buildings that the scavengers had left standing. The meeting agreed and Two and Three Troops were assigned, along with C Troop and half of Six Troop, led by Andy Scales. They were to take all of the wagons and whichever trucks that could get there and back. Zach also called on Edwin Johnson to lead the expedition, but the retired army officer declined because he couldn't stand the jolting of a wagon or riding horseback. Zach was selected to lead the second expedition.

William Smith stood, cleared his throat, started to speak, took a drink of water and cleared his throat, again. He apologized for his lack of speaking abilities and reported that the Commissary was well stocked with clothing,

weapons and canned goods. There were several dozen cases of MREs, but he recommended that they be held in reserve for emergencies. “Even then, you’d have to be desperate to eat them,” Ed Johnson interjected to laughter.

William agreed with his assessment and continued with his report, saying that the only real shortage they had would be ammunition and proposed that any future expeditions look for black powder weapons. He asked that if anyone knew how to manufacture powder, they should get together with Ed and draw up a plan. They also should look for lead, maybe from church windows, sash weights, etc. He asked if there were any seamstresses in the crowd, they were needed to repair some of the clothing. Some of the items the Settlement needed were needles and thread, clothing patterns, shoes, musical instruments, sheet music, ledger books, cloth, rain and snow gear, snow shoes and skis, medicines, toys and things to entertain the little ones, games of any kind, and a lot of other, little things which make life bearable.

Gail O’Malley stated that several teachers would also go, to gather more books and supplies. She suggested that Carla Simons, who was a part of C Troop, anyway, and Digby Twill be given the task. After this was approved, Gail stated that school would recommence right after the second expedition got back.

Digby was a shy, young man, going prematurely bald. He wrote poetry and songs in his spare time, but was always there when a job needed doing. He was tall and thin, but he soon demonstrated that he was very strong and a pleasant companion. He was forever telling stories to the children who flocked around him. Everyone liked him and several of the women were casting a hopeful eye in his direction.

John Tesh suggested that a memorial be set up for the fallen and it

was approved, unanimously. Carlo and Gino Peligrino, who had been stonecutters before they retired, offered to carve the monument.

Reports showed that the DeLeons had been able to mine a couple of tons of coal from the seam they had found and a hundred cords of wood had been cut and were drying, though more would be needed. Several hundred more cords of downed wood, already dry, was available, also. Mike Stuart had been able to use the motor from one of the trucks to build a splitter.

Ed Johnson reported that there were enough weapons, with what was brought back from the first expedition to Rawlins, to provide guns to every household and the troopers, including the Auxiliary Troop. The training of troopers in infantry tactics was coming along, with dry firing of weapons, due to worries about a lack of ammunition. He approved of Zach's idea for training with the bows and Charlie Wright agreed to try and forge arrow and spear heads, now that they had brought back enough tools to save him from making shovels, hoes and other farming implements. Ed seconded William Smith's request for black powder weapons. Other supplies he requested were saddles, harness, ammunition and riding boots. "Are we going to adopt a flag for the Settlement or are we going to keep the Stars and Stripes?" Ed asked. His question was followed by a stunned silence.

Hunter Williams proposed that the Stars and Stripes be retained in respect to the nation they all hoped would be reborn, but that a committee be selected to design a flag for the Settlement and a guidon for the troops. He was elected as chairman, along with Ed Johnson as the co-chairman, and told to pick a committee. They were to report back at the next meeting.

Jim and Bob Parker reported that the crops were coming along nicely and the harvest should be large enough to provide adequate foodstuffs through

the winter. When a count was taken of people who knew how to can, there were more than enough for that task. They asked for any seeds, which the scroungers could find, even flowers, since many kinds could be used for medicines and teas.

Tom Schummer reported that Charlie Wright, the Wards and Bill Santini had been able to put together plans for duplicating spinning wheels, carders and looms and several were in the process of being built. The alpaca wool, when combined with the sheep's wool, would provide plenty of material to weave cloth for home consumption with surplus for trade. They thanked the Rawlins Expedition for bringing back screws, nails, braces and other small hardware items. Tacks, drill bits and hand tools were still needed.

The Edwards and George Esperanza were confident in the number of cattle for the winter. However, they insisted that it would be vital to double the current size of the herd to maintain sustainability of the meat supply. The hogs that were brought out of the Dakotas by the Tesh family were doing well, but the expected litters would not be at slaughter weight until the end of the winter months. There would be no alpaca meat until the herd had matured, which would take several more years. The increase would allow for the expansion of the wool and cloth trade.

The cattle expedition was postponed until the Mormon Expedition or the Second Rawlins Expedition returned and the weather permitted. There was a general movement of heads as the audience turned to look out the window at the weather. It was getting on towards late September and the rains were expected to turn to snow at any time.

Mike Stuart and Andy Scales reported that the vehicles from Rawlins were in pretty good shape and would make the round trip for the second

expedition. They ignored the question of the ATVs, which surprised Zach, as the two were notorious practical jokers and should have loved nothing more than to rub in their uselessness. Fuel and spare parts were their major requirements, not surprisingly.

There were no matters for the judiciary to handle and William Smith, as governor, announced that candidates for the election needed to get their applications in by the end of the following week, with a month of electioneering and the vote to be taken shortly after. He thanked everyone and gaveled the meeting to a close.

Chapter 15

Newcomers from the West

Summer/Fall 2041

It looks like the Settlement has matured enough to be successful. The committees are all going great guns and it looks like I can leave at the end of winter. The crops look good and the animals are fat, dumb and happy. We have had a huge increase in the pig population, so it looks like ham for Thanksgiving. There have been signs of more mountain lions and we lost several sheep. A cloth and weavers hut has been built in the lower valley. They have set up the new equipment and the Schummers are training their apprentices.

Ed Johnson has done a magnificent job with the troops. They are looking like a fighting force and can charge and deploy like professionals. I wonder if any others are as concerned that they may be called to fight and die before they have even lived. Is this what it was like in the Dark Ages? I am looking through some of the history books we brought back to study how society functioned in those times.

Mrs. O'Malley has got the school humming along. They must be doing a great job, from the groans and complaints of the students. I will have to look into paper making as a task. We can't scrounge forever.

Father Tillford has a happier congregation than Simmons ever had. A lot more preaching about love and peace, instead of fire and brimstone. His sister is a big help to him. I may try and convince him that celibacy is not necessary anymore, maybe talk up the need for future clergy.

The second trip to Rawlins was uneventful. I hope to get another expedition together to hunt cattle along the river bottoms. If we can get several hundred head of cattle in for the winter, we will have no provision problem. This will give our herds of sheep and alpaca a chance to increase. We will need the wool for any trading in the future.

There still is no word from Matt and the Mormon Expedition. There were two pigeons that came in on the same day, but there was no message. We figured that they escaped from Matt. Folks are starting to get worried. There was a movement to send another troop out, but cooler heads prevailed. When we go after cattle, we can look in that direction and try and pick up the trail.

Two days before the second cattle roundup was planned to start, three strangers requested entrance to the valley. The sentries held them until Ed Johnson, William Smith and Zach could gather a troop and ride down to meet them. They were a mixed lot of men. The tallest one was skinny as a rail. He had long, blond hair, clubbed to a ponytail. His long, tanned face had a bored look, which we later found to be his natural state, no matter what he was doing. One of his companions, a short, barrel of a man, was all smiles. He looked like a picture of one of those snowmen you saw in magazines. A round head sat on a round body with no apparent neck to connect them. He had bowlegs and always seemed to stand with his arms akimbo. A smile wreathed his face and laugh lines radiated from his large, slightly protruding eyes. Even his nose was a round ball stuck above his small mouth. As if to emphasize his rotund appearance, he was completely bald. The third man was the one that held

everyone's attention, though. He was nondescript in body, a little above average height, neither fat nor thin. His back was ramrod straight and he had the appearance of a military background. The one distinguishing mark was a scar, which slashed his face on the left side. Something had sheared through his forehead, left eye and down his left cheek. His left eye was milky looking. His remaining green eye had an amused look, like the world was one big joke, but it didn't extend to his mouth, which was a tight line.

All three were bearded and tired looking, with their mounts no better. The only aspect of the trio that didn't seem worn, dirty or tired was their weaponry. They all carried M-23 carbines and the men wore crossed bandoliers, like the old pictures of Mexican banditos.

"You all get your fill of looking?" queried the one-eyed man. "Matt said that you were friendly."

That last comment was a verbal bombshell. Everyone started talking at once, asking about Matt and the expedition. The rest shook hands and kept asking questions until the portly man put two fingers to his lips and blew a whistle shrill enough to startle everyone into stillness.

"Jimmy Pinder, here," he smiled. "Just wanted to make sure that we weren't about to be trampled by you good folks. We've come a long way and wouldn't mind a bite and a swig. My friends are Stretch Linder and Harry McGregor.

"Don't let Harry scare you none. We had a dust up on the Mexican border when we were with the Border Patrol and a crazy from down south did a little unauthorized plastic surgery on old Harry's face. He's a good soul and a crack shot.

“You’ll find Stretch and Harry are pretty quiet, but I do the talking for three, so it pretty much averages out.”

Zach ordered several of the troopers to get the Council together and meet them at the Ranch. Another was sent off to ask Mrs. Schummer if she could get a meal together for some hungry and thirsty travelers. The rest of the crowd escorted the three men to the Ranch, peppering Jimmy with questions. Ed noticed that Harry was inspecting the valley with a careful eye and decided to keep him under observation, until they decided whether the newcomers were trustworthy.

Settlers came streaming out of the upper valley after the news of the strangers’ arrival had spread. The families of the troopers that had been assigned to the Mormon Expedition rushed the men with questions. William Smith told them that the men were going to have a meal and something to drink before answering questions, but that they would come out as soon as they had finished. Before being led into the ranch house, Jimmy announced that the boys were in fine health, when they had left them three weeks ago.

William was standing at the door to prevent a crowd from entering and only Mrs. Schummer and her daughter, Penny, were inside, serving the strangers. Digby Twill came up and lightly tapped Zach on the shoulder. He nodded to where Father Tillford was standing, by the corner of the cabin away from the gathered crowd. Digby rubbed his hands on his pants in a nervous gesture, when they reached the priest. The young teacher cleared his throat, started speaking and cleared his throat again when his words came out in a squeaky croak.

“Father, Zach,” he started. “Um, I, ah, wanted to ask Zach something, but, since I am a member of your congregation, Father, I figured

you should hear it, too. Not that it's bad," he hastily added. "It's just, well, I know you won't approve, Father, or, at least, well, I don't think you will, what with the Catholic Church, and all. I mean, well, um, you, um, might think it was okay, but, well, um, you know."

"Digby, get on with it," Zach said in an exasperated tone. They man was usually very eloquent, but something had turned him into a rambling, mumbling, stuttering idiot. Zach thought he knew what it was, but waited until Digby came to the point by himself.

"Oh, yeah, well, what I wanted to ask Zach, Father, was if he would marry me. Well, not him and me, don't get me wrong," he glanced quickly between Zach and Father Tillford and laughed nervously. "What I want is for him to perform the ceremony."

Father Tillford tilted his head and asked, "And why not me? Is your fiancé opposed to a Catholic wedding?"

"Oh, no, Father," Digby hastily replied. "It's just that, well, this is kind of difficult, but it not 'fiancé' it's 'fiancés'. I mean, the Council passed a rule about having polygamy and I asked, and was accepted by, the Simons girls, Paula and Carla."

"I see. Well, the church, before the current troubles, had a policy about that, of course. However, as the Bible accepts multiple wives and polygamy is allowed by the law of the land and there is a new paradigm, in today's world, I am inclined to accept the concept.

"Marriage, if used to sanctify a commitment, is a Holy Sacrament. I am inclined to allow polygamous marriages, within the framework of the Church, since there is no way to get directives from the Vatican or a Bishop. However, I warn you, if the Church later comes out in keeping with its old

policy, you will have to decide on which of the Simons sisters you will remain married to, or leave the Church.”

Zach looked at the priest in amazement. He had assumed that the stoic cleric would uphold the old Church doctrine and disapprove of the rule on polygamous marriages.

Father Tillford caught his look and said with a smile, “I am not as stuffy as you may have thought, Zach. These are difficult times and, with the massive loss of life in the world, we have to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. There is also Christ’s admonition to the Pharisees to ‘give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God that which is God’s’. Polygamy is a worldly rule and God, in the past, has approved of polygamy. Now, if we want to address same sex marriage, I would have to disapprove of that, or marriage between adults and children.”

“All right,” Zach replied and clapped Father Tillford on the shoulder. “All right,” he repeated and laughed. It appeared that working with this sky pilot would be a lot easier than working with Pastor Simmons. To poke a little fun, he asked, “Does that mean that you will be looking for a bride, Father? Married priests were the norm there, for a while.”

“No, I am not looking for a wife, but, you are correct, St. Paul was married and he brought his wife on his missionary travels. I would not condemn any priest who felt that he was justified in getting married, again, within the spiritual doctrine of the Church; marriage for companionship and procreation.

“I may have to prepare a sermon on the matter,” he mused as he walked off, deep in thought.

At that moment, a stir by the ranch house door brought their attention

back to the visitors. William called for the Council to come in and told the other, disappointed members of the crowd that there would be a short meeting with the strangers and then they would come out and be available to the rest of the community.

The Council filed in and found seats on the available chairs and countertops or stood around the room. Jimmy, Stretch and Harry looked well satisfied with the meal and were leaning back in their chairs. Stretch had taken a straw from the broom and was working on a shred of meat that had become lodged in his teeth.

William came right to the point and asked, “Where and when did you meet Matt and his troops?”

Jimmy as spokesman for the trio, replied, “It was about three weeks ago. We were part of the Dannites, the military wing of the Mormon Church. We have a regular patrol route around the boundaries of the land claimed by the Mormons and we came across them, in camp, near the southeastern border.

“We questioned them and they told us about the Settlement, what they was there for and introduced us to the Borders and O’Haras. Brother Jameson, the leader of our patrol, questioned them privately and they confirmed the story.

“The three of us talked with Matt and he invited us, being non-Mormons, to join you folks. We discussed it among ourselves and decided that it looked like a new opportunity for us. When we spoke with Brother Jameson, he agreed that it was our decision. The Mormons, like every other group we have heard about, would rather have people of their own kind around them, so to speak, and we Gentiles are kind of outsiders. We got

directions from Matt and here we are.”

“What were you doing with the Mormons, anyway?” queried Zach.
“Did you grow up in the area? Are there many more Gentiles in the area? If so, would they want to join us, too?”

Jimmy Pinder scratched his nose and looked at the other two, before answering. “No, we aren’t from the Mormon Settlements. We were with the Border Militia, set up by the American Party government, which was continued through the other administrations. That’s how Harry got his scar; we was fighting groups of Hispanics who were trying to get into the country. After the border collapsed, we headed north with our company. The commander and about half of the men had been recruited in Utah. The rest of them went along for the moment. Most of the Gentiles among us, eventually, struck out for their homes, but we three had nowhere to go back to and were invited to stay and be part of the Dannites.

“As to the number of other Gentiles in the area, there are a few families scattered about, but I don’t know the exact number. They are not being oppressed, if that is what you are asking.”

“No,” Zach replied, “but it would be good to know if we are going to have an influx of people from the Mormon Settlements. We have plenty of room, but the farming and ranching lands won’t support too many more. We are looking to relocate, if a good place could be found, where there would be more room and more distance between us and our less-than-friendly neighbors.”

Zach went on to describe the situation with the Sioux and the Mahdists and the potential problem with the Fundamentalists. He explained the concern that was shared by the rest of the community about attacks or

harassment from these groups.

Harry McGregor indicated that enemies were going to be found wherever they might relocate. He indicated that Arizona, New Mexico, South Texas and Southern California had been invaded by the Hispanic migration out of South and Central America. The Mormons had claimed Utah, Southern Idaho and parts of Southeast Oregon. The land around Denver and other major cities was uninhabitable due to radiation. If the Sioux had claimed the Central Plains, the Mahdists claimed the East and the Fundamentalists were in the Kansas/Missouri area, there weren't too many places left that would support the number of people and provide adequate defensive positions. Arable land was everywhere, but too open. They might try the Leadville/Georgetown/Aspen area to the south. That was defensible, but he wasn't familiar enough with the area to know if there was enough land to grow the crops necessary to support the Settlement.

Harry asked what the possibility of spreading out in these mountains would be. "There should be more of these valleys that could be settled. It would provide for a scattered populace, true, but defensive positions could be established and those threatened could fall back behind these lines of defense. The biggest problem he saw with this plan was the elevation of the land. Winters would be early and harsh, but with enough provisions stored, they could make a go of it."

The Council asked a few more, desultory questions and the meeting broke up. William called for a full town meeting in two days' time to discuss the situation and he asked the Council members to mull over what they had discussed.

William took Zach and Ed Johnson aside to discuss the possibility of

sending out short expeditions to the surrounding area and doing a more thorough job of surveying than they had done to this point. Ed encouraged the expeditions, saying that someone with farming, ranching, and, if possible, mining experience, should be included. This would give a complete picture. Further, he said that the Auxiliaries and younger troops would get a wealth of training by forming the escorts. There should be little danger of encountering any large band of hostiles. In addition, he suggested that several of the older boys and men of Seven Troop, Stephen Young's, be assigned as second in charge of the expedition, to give them some leadership experience. He asked Zach to speak with Stretch Linder, Jimmy Pinder and Harry McGregor to enlist them as leaders in the survey efforts, training the seconds.

Zach agreed with this assessment and said he would speak with the three, draw up rosters and present them to the Council for approval.

Chapter 16

Expeditions and Prodigal Sons

Summer/Fall 2041

Things are moving pretty fast, now. Jimmy, Stretch and Harry are going to be valuable assets to the Settlement, if they decide to stay.

I am realigning the troops to cover the losses from Rawlins. I am hoping that the new faces will keep the rest from thinking too much about how the gaps were made. I would imagine that there is nothing worse for a soldier than to ponder on dying, especially ones this young.

Paula and Carla Simons have asked to be released from the Auxiliary troop to prepare for their wedding. Carla is needed in the classroom and I hate to think of the married women in harm's way. These wives will be the mothers of our future and they must be protected. Probably, I would be called sexist, in the old days. The only problem with that is that Jenny Smith insists on accompanying her husband, even though she is pregnant. Fortunately, Doc White and the women are overriding her. Luther has been adamant, to me, about her staying at the Settlement.

I will select the troops that will go out surveying and there is the other expedition to the river bottoms to round up more cattle. With all of the new mouths to feed, I would rather have abundance than a dearth. Bob Parker is heading up a haying party outside, so feed shouldn't be a problem.

The council meeting was held in the town hall council chambers, as usual. The room was packed with citizens, all eager to participate in the

discussion of their future. Governor Smith gaveled the meeting to order and pointed to the board where the agenda had been written.

“The only item on the agenda will be a debate on the idea of moving the town to another, more secure location, if one could be found. The alternatives are staying in Mitchell and, for want of a better word, colonizing other, suitable nearby valleys. Zach Banducci will speak for the Council and outline his and Ed Johnson’s plans for several, short-term expeditions to the surrounding area. Zach,” William finished and relinquished the podium.

Zach used magnets to post a large topographical map to the board. He took the pointer from the attached shelf and placed the tip on Mitchell. “Here is where we are. The Rockies stretch to the south for a good way. There is a lot of area, but most is mountainous and uninhabitable.

”North of us is a break in the mountains where Green River and the Oregon Trail crossed. north of that is a continuation of the Rockies to Canada.”

Turning back to his audience, he explained that there needed to be three elements to opening up a new settlement: first, enough flat land to support crops or cattle; second, water and building sites; third, a trail system which could be made passable year-round, with horses, skis or snowshoes. With that in mind he pointed to several small valleys that would be investigated as summer pasturage, but looked, from the map, as unsuitable for their purposes. He then indicated five valleys, at lower altitudes, which might serve. Two were close to smaller basins and could serve as population centers and the smaller valleys as farm, hay or pasturage, as indicated.

“I have spoken with our newest members,” he continued, nodding at the three men. “They have agreed to lead an expedition apiece. These

expeditions will not only provide for a survey of the mountains around us; they will give a chance to train the troop leaders and the troops in working in the mountains. The expedition leaders will act as mentors. They have had a lot of experience with the Border Militia and the Dannites and that experience will be invaluable to us.

“Until we have word on the Mormon Expedition, I would like to realign the troops to this,” he said, putting up another chart on the board. Two, Three and Five Troops will be joined by Troops A, B and C for the exploration parties. Troops Seven and D will prepare for another cattle drive. Seven Troop, as you can see, is a mixed troop. This will be the nucleus for regular and auxiliary troops, when we have more recruits. Carla and Paula Simons have asked to be excused. They will be preparing for their wedding to Digby, which will be held in three weeks, a couple of days before the expeditions head out. That will give everyone plenty of time to get to know each other and prepare. We are also hoping that Matt’s troop will return before then. Questions?”

There was applause and congratulations at the wedding announcement. Bright red, Digby Twill beamed a broad smile. Carla and Paula each held one of his hands. After the initial hubbub had died down, Paul Tesh wanted to know the time frame of these new expeditions. He was worried about the number of troops that would be left for the defense of the Settlement. Zach assured him that Four and Six Troops would be sufficient to man the guard posts at the upper and lower ends of the valley. He reiterated that all of the citizens of the Settlement would be prepared to defend the valley, if there were any problems, and that everyone would go armed, whatever their duties were.

The meeting broke up soon after that and the women gathered around Carla and Paula Simons and rushed them away. This would be a real ceremony, performed by Father Tillford and they were determined to do it up right, from trousseaus to a wedding cake. Digby was surrounded by the men, who made bawdy comments regarding his ability to bed two wives and took him off to have a celebratory drink or two.

Ed Johnson joined Zach and commented, "I have to agree with Tesh, we seem to be spreading ourselves a little thin. The militia should be able to handle any problem, don't get me wrong, but there will be a lot of worrying about sons and daughters off in the wilderness."

Zach nodded, "Yeah, I know, but the surveying groups will be pretty safe. The hunters haven't seen anything to indicate that there is anyone living in these mountains and Pinder, McGregor and Linder are experienced in this type of scout, from their Border Militia days.

"The cattle expedition will have some of the older boys and we should be strong enough to take care of any situations. I am having the signal run up to meet with Two Wolves and see if he will have any of his Sioux near the river bottoms in the next few weeks. If they are, then we will wait until it is clear. We don't really need the additional cattle, but I would feel better if we had them, in case of a long winter."

"Well, I see your point. I just wanted to make sure you understood the mood of the people. See you, later," Ed finished as he limped away holding his wife's arm.

At first, Harry, with his ugly scar, scared the smaller children. Soon, however, he won them over with his marvelous carvings of animals. He would sit in front of his house, quietly working on a piece of wood. When he

was finished with the horse, camel, dog or whatever, he would place it on the porch railing and begin working on another carving. Eventually, kids would start gathering and, when there was a crowd, he would look up. At this point, most would run away, but, when they found out that those who stayed got a carving, more and more of them stayed and soon were sitting around him with whittling knives, learning how to carve and listening to his retelling of stories he had learned as a child. By the end of the first week of his stay, he always had a train of children behind him.

When Gail O'Malley confronted him with the fact that he was keeping the children from their lessons, he tipped his hat and instructed the children to go to school and not to come around until they had finished their homework and chores. After the kids scattered, he simply tipped his hat to Gail and left her gawping in the middle of the street. She, apparently, expected an argument and was left flat-footed.

Soon after, Sarah stopped by Zach's house. He invited her in and led her into the kitchen. The table was covered with an oilcloth and his guns were laid out for cleaning. Hastily, he bundled everything up and moved it to the back porch, apologizing for the mess.

"I've seen bachelor pads, before," Sarah laughed. She moved to the sink and filled the kettle with water. She was surprised to see that the electric stove had been removed and replaced with one that burned wood. Zach lifted a lid on the right side of the iron monster and fed kindling into the firebox. After a couple of breaths, the coals ignited the resin-rich pine and the fire flared to life.

"I'm not much of a housekeeper," Zach admitted.

"Maybe you should find one, then," returned Sarah.

This was getting too close to a topic that Zach wanted to avoid. Since they had rescued her in Rawlins, he had been telling himself that he didn't want to be saddled with, well, he had never really named that state, but he insisted that he needed to stay unattached. Zach moved away from her after their initial closeness, since he was expecting to be leaving. He opened cupboards and finally found two mugs and a tin of instant coffee. He hated instant, but it was about all they could find. After it was gone, he would have to drink tea made from local plants, a thought he also avoided.

He laid the table with the coffee things and a plate of leftover baking powder biscuits he had made for breakfast. By the time the water was hot and the coffee poured, the topic had changed to the upcoming cattle drive.

"Zach, I am here on more than a social call. Some of the women, mainly the mothers of the auxiliary girls, asked me to talk to you about, well, about the propriety of having so many young girls and boys together for such a long time. You know, without a, a, well, a..."

"A chaperone?" Zach asked with amusement.

Sarah blushed. "Yes, a chaperone," she replied, with some asperity. "Sandra Parker, for example, her Mary is only seventeen. And Bonny Edwards, Beth Zales, Melinda York, Gina Peligrino and several of the girls are even younger. They don't feel it is right for them to be alone."

"They won't be alone; they will be with the rest of us. And, what do you think I am, chopped liver? I will be there to 'protect' them from the 'evil boys'. Do you and they think I am going to start up a brothel or something?" Zach was getting irritated, mainly because this had been on his mind, too. He hadn't wanted to become a nursemaid to, as he thought of them, a bunch of giggling girls and oversexed boys. "And, what about the survey parties, are

they going to get a chaperone, each, too? Anyway, Luther and Jenny, who are married by the way, will be going along. They can watch them.”

“Now, don’t get up on your high horse, and don’t get crude. Brothel, indeed. No, we, I mean, they just want someone with a little maturity and good sense to go along, as chaperone, a female.

“I thought Jenny was confined to the Settlement. At least, that is what everyone thought. And anyway, Luther and Jenny will be more concerned with each other, than the other girls. Don’t you remember what it was like to be a newlywed?” Sarah retorted, with some heat. “As to the survey parties, they won’t be out for more than a day or two.”

Zach threw up his hands and said, “Okay, okay. Send along a chaperone, bring back the chastity belt, I don’t care. We will take a chaperone or a dozen, if that makes the good ladies happy. You know, of course, if the kids want to get together, they will get together. It doesn’t matter how many chaperones you have. Whether it’s here or out on the trail.

“Jenny. Yeah, she browbeat Luther into letting her go. She said she would either ride in the wagon, with the supplies, or follow on her own. I wish her baby would come and she would have a reason to stay.

“Now, drink your coffee and have a biscuit. Who are they sending, anyway? Someone who has to be coddled or someone who can sleep on the ground and rough it?” Zach queried, taking a sip of coffee, which he promptly spat out at her answer.

“Why, me. The ladies thought that we had a certain comfort level with each other and felt that I would be a good choice,” Sarah replied, ignoring Zach’s social blunder, with a quiet smile.

Zach felt the noose closing in on him and suspected that the ladies

were taking this excuse to throw him together with Sarah. Knowing he was beaten and couldn't think of any reason for not taking her, he glared at her and said, "Well, all right, then. You."

Sarah finished her coffee and, in the ensuing, uncomfortable silence, was hurt that he seemed not to want her along. Taking the last bite of biscuit, she arose and Zach followed her to the front door in silence. He, hastily, moved around her to pull open the door. Sarah started across the threshold, hesitated and turned to look at Zach. He found himself inches from her and he resisted the urge to back up from her, fearing that she would see such an action as being rude.

"What's the matter, Zach? I thought we had become good friends on the way back from Rawlins. Was I wrong? Did I misinterpret the kisses? What is it?"

Zach couldn't stand to see the single tear that left her right eye and traced a slow track down her cheek to hang trembling on her delicate chin, before dropping onto her blouse and leaving a darker spot on the light blue material. He, gently, took a hold of her upper arms and drew her back into the house, knowing that this was probably a big mistake on his part. As he enclosed her in his arms, he nudged the door shut with his foot. Sarah's arms crept around his waist and she, suddenly, held him fiercely to her.

"It's not you, Sarah, it's that I'm going to leave sometime soon. I have always planned on leaving, after the Settlement is through the initial rough part," he whispered into her russet hair, which smelled faintly of flowers.

Sarah tilted her face up to his and said gently, "Does that mean you can't take someone else with you?"

“Sarah, it would be too hard. It would be me, alone, against anything. It would be dangerous, you know that. Here you are as safe as you can be, today. There are plenty of people and companions and...”

She put her hand over his mouth. “Maybe, I don’t want safety and companionship. Maybe, just the two of us would be enough. Maybe, I would want to be in danger with you rather than safe without you.” She removed her hand and quickly kissed him before spinning out of his arms and out the door. Zach stood holding the door and staring at her rushing down the street.

“Crap,” he spat.

The wedding was held amidst great fanfare on a Sunday. Since the girls didn’t have parents, Gino and Carlo Pelegrino were asked to give away the brides, as the oldest men in the Settlement. Digby asked Zach to be his Best Man and Edward Tesh as another groomsman. Carla asked Margaret Tesh to be her Maid of Honor and Paula asked Sarah Mitchleson. Zach was beginning to feel the pressure of continued matchmaking, but was surprised that he didn’t feel quite as skittish about it as he had originally.

The ceremony went off without a hitch, even to the kissing of the brides. Carla took precedence as the eldest and the kisses met with a chorus of cheers and catcalls. Jessica York had baked a wedding cake and her daughters-in-law, Martha, Wendy and Anne, baked several other cakes, to provide enough for the whole community. Governor Smith, the keeper of the alcohol supply, turned over a case of champagne for the reception. ‘Doc’ White agreed, saying there was “very little medicinal property in the bubbly”.

A surprising number of settlers had and played musical instruments. There were five guitars, an oboe, two trumpets, a banjo, four violins, three flutes and a miscellany of other instruments, including a set of bagpipes. Gail

O'Malley had picked up a wide variety of sheet music in Rawlins that the little band had been practicing in secret for the week.

The Pelegrino brothers showed a surprising ability on the dance floor, considering their age and various infirmities. Zach was sweating profusely by the time he had finished his dance with Sarah. He had never been a good dancer and didn't much care for the practice, but he managed to get through the waltz without treading on her feet. He found that she was determined to be with him to the point of holding onto his arm for most of the night and through several other dances. He was continually tugging at his shirt collar and necktie in his nervousness, until Sarah laughingly tugged off the tie and unbuttoned his collar.

As proud as he was that she had chosen him, he was irritated at the knowing stares he got from the women in the crowd and the nudges and winks from the men. "Lord," he thought, "it's like they knew all along that we would get together. I may surprise them yet."

John Tesh had managed to find a "wandering case of liquor" and by the time the newlyweds left the party, there was a long train of inebriated well-wishers and the tradition of shivarees continued that night.

Late the next morning, a rider galloped up to the church and began ringing the bell. People quickly gathered to hear the news, all carrying their weapons, which relieved Zach's mind about them taking the alarm bell seriously. The rider was Melinda York of Troop C and she kept pulling on the bell, excitedly, until her father, Evan, holding his head, told her to "cut it out".

"They're back. They're back. Matt is back from the Mormon Settlements. He's coming into the lower valley now. Come on." She

promptly leaped onto her mount and dashed away back towards the lower valley. Everyone scattered to find transportation and meet the wayfarers.

Ed Johnson had been down in the lower valley, on an early morning inspection to make sure that the sentries weren't sleeping off the effects of the previous day's celebration. He welcomed Matt with a firm handshake and a clap on the back. The leader of the Scouts had a beard, but had taken a bath, along with the rest of his party, in the river before riding home. He was leading three wagons, his troop and a handful of strangers. The train wound through the valley and up to the Settlement; with troopers falling out once they had spotted family members.

Ed led the depleted train to the town hall, where everyone dismounted and entered. Matt and his troopers took places in the audience area and chairs were set up on the stage, opposite the council seats. By the time preparations had been made, the hall was filled. The Council took their places and William Smith gaveled for quiet.

He thanked everyone for coming and called on Matt Busby to take the podium and "have at it". William sat down to a round of applause for Matt, who mounted the steps of the stage and took his place. He started by introducing the strangers, saying that they had decided to join him. The Mormon Elders encouraged this, in the same way as they encouraged Jimmy Pinder, Stretch Linder and Harry McGregor to leave. There was no animosity, but everyone knew that the Mormons would rather have all Gentiles leave, peacefully. Several other families of Gentiles had decided to stay.

Matt went on to tell of the trip out. He praised the conduct of the troopers. They had passed through some beautiful country, and then had

encountered the drier, rockier areas on the western slopes of the Rockies. Seeing Jimmy Pinder beaming up at him, he condensed his account of their first meeting with the Dannites and continued with his account of meeting with the Elders. They had been polite and they had welcomed the party and the O'Hara and Border families.

They had seen Jimmy, Stretch and Harry off the next day and then had sat down to discuss trade. "I would rather have fought grizzlies than do that," Matt said, which brought a ripple of laughter from the crowd. He gave the details of the trade agreement, which he told the Elders, would have to be ratified by the Mitchell Council. In essence, there would be trade caravans allowed into New Canaan, a new town on the eastern border set up as a trading station, with cloth and grain being in the biggest demand. A bolt of cloth would be valued at a hundredweight of salt; grain, either corn or wheat, would be traded at weight for weight. A booth would be allowed on Market Day, which was every Thursday, to trade any other items with the locals. There was a need for milk cows, which would be traded on a weight for weight basis for salt, but there was no guarantee that they would still be needed when the trade caravan returned. The Elders also mentioned that they would like to start their own herd of alpacas and sheep.

He reported that they hadn't found any other locations for the settlement, which were better than where they were. The one possibility was on a plateau, but there was no ready supply of water, though it was easier to defend. They crossed the trail of several herds of buffalo and found the remains of hunting camps, possibly made by the Sioux, but no parties of the Indians.

When he asked for questions, William Smith asked if they had sent a

pigeon and he replied that the pigeons had escaped. Zach happened to be looking at Jacob Swan, at the moment, and noticed that he blushed furiously and ducked his head at Matt's words.

Gene Daley asked about the kinds of trade goods, other than cloth and grain, in which the Mormons would be interested. Matt said that, when he talked to the people in the stalls at the Market, he was asked for leather goods. The local cobbler said that he needed leather for shoes, work aprons, gloves, boots and a lot of other things. Other items that Matt and his troopers saw at the Market consisted of toys, wooden buckets, wagon wheels, a lot of wooden and some iron items, like candleholders, hinges, latches and household goods. Matt suggested that the Settlement didn't sell any alpacas or sheep to the Mormons, since it would eliminate the market.

The meeting broke up after the questions died out. Everyone praised the work Matt had done and the final order of business was to vote to approve the trade agreement. William Smith signed it for the Settlement.

Chapter 17

The

Cattle Drive

Summer/Fall 2041

It is good to have Matt back. The additional troop at the Settlement has eased the stress levels, a little. He did very well on the Mormon Expedition. To think, I was about to let him go or kill him, way back when. He is anxious to lead another trading caravan back to the Mormon Settlements. Unfortunately, we don't have enough cloth or tanned leather to make it worthwhile.

The first of the survey expeditions have gone out. Without chaperones, I might add. I sent a messenger to Two Wolves and he assures me that the Sioux are hunting to the north and won't break camp until they have finished processing the buffalo they have been harvesting for winter food. He was interested in the Mormon Expedition and said he would talk with his Council to see about joining in on the trade caravan with buffalo robes, if there was a surplus. I gave him twenty pounds of salt, as a friendship gift.

Scouting parties have reported seeing the cattle near the river bottoms. I'm thankful for that, since we don't have the expertise to roundup a herd on the open plain. In the bottoms, the river banks will help channel the animals during the drive. So, we start tomorrow. Sarah is going along as the chaperone. Could be interesting, this trip. Luther lost his fight with Jenny

and she is going along, too. We will be taking two wagons to haul supplies. William Campbell and his son will be the drivers, but he says that being long-haul truckers hadn't prepared them for this.

The school has been set up and is running seven classes. Gail is adamant that the troopers must attend school when they are at the Settlement, but we need them as sentries and on patrol, so the Council told her that she would have to work it out with the boys and girls, themselves. I don't think she likes me much, as I opposed the mandatory school attendance.

The harvest should be ready by the time we return. There isn't much wheat; it didn't grow well in the uplands. The corn looks good, however and we will have to settle for cornbread, for a while. Several of the farmers say that the flatland outside the front entrance will support grain crops, but I hate to have our food supplies defenseless. It would also point us out with a big red arrow, if the fields were spotted. Hopefully, one of the Survey parties will find suitable land for farming, if not; we will have to save enough of the flour we have salvaged for emergencies. There is still a fair amount of it from the Rawlins expedition, but it is going fast.

Leif Ericson, a name he hates and never forgave his father for saddling him with, is going along with Troops Two and A to look for ore bearing rock. He wants to find more coal and, maybe, some lead. That would be great, since we did bring back a dozen black powder rifles from Rawlins and all the lead we could find, about a half-ton or so. We still don't have a source for sulfur and saltpeter to make powder.

The masons are looking into building a water mill for grinding the corn and wheat into flour. Kendall Shea says that he can set up something for the short-term, but they really need a full sized mill to process any quantity of

grain. He wants to try and use metal rollers, rather than a grinding wheel. The problem with the wheel is that small bits of stone get worn away and end up in the flour. This will, eventually, wear down teeth, but we will have to hope for the best.

“All right, settle down,” Zach shouted over the hubbub of the members of the cattle expedition. “Look, we are leaving tomorrow and I want all gear packed and ready for inspection this afternoon. The wagons will be parked at the Ranch and the inspection will begin at 3:00pm. We will sleep there and pull out at 4:00am tomorrow,” he finished to a chorus of groans.

“Yeah, yeah. I know you prima donnas probably want breakfast in bed, but that is not on the agenda,” he continued to catcalls and laughter. “We will be joined by Mrs. Sarah Mitchelson, who will be the cha., I mean, advisor to Troop E, I will be advisor to Seven Troop.

“We will be following the same route we took on the first expedition. However, there will be a few changes in the way we do things. A lot of cattle got out by climbing the banks and breaking through the flimsy barriers, so we will spend a few days blocking the paths up the bank better. We will set up blocks at the north and south ends of the drive area and then work the west bank to close up any escape routes with stronger rope and brush barriers. Any cattle that spook can only escape to the east and that’s towards home. Once that is finished, we will stop up the gaps in the east and, only then, will we drive up the river banks.”

“Troop E will be divided in half for the drive. Amanda, you will take four members and watch the west bank. Jeannine, you will take the remaining three and... Yes, Jenny?” he asked as he saw the indignant protest start.

Jenny hesitated, and then said, "There are ten members of E Troop. You counted off nine." She crossed her arms and slouched down in her chair.

"You know the answer to that, Jenny. You are to remain in camp with Sarah, I mean, Mrs. Mitchelson. 'Doc' White said that you were not to ride a horse, under any circumstances." When Jenny started to protest, Zach held up his hand to forestall her. "Jenny, this is the way it is going to be. Either that or you stay here. Your choice.

"Anyway, as I was saying, Jeannine will take the three other troopers and patrol the east bank. Both groups will stay even with us and simply drive any cattle that break through north on the plain.

"Stan, you will take your section and wait at the north end of the drive zone. When the cattle arrive, you will try and hold them on the flats. Keep turning them in a circle so they can't run, but keep it loose enough to keep them from panicking. Mike, you, Ted, George and Stephen will help drive the cattle, along with Mr. Peter Campbell and myself. Luther, you and Edward will act as scouts. Ed, you will be scouting to the south and west; Luther, you take the north and east.

"Listen up everyone," he finished. "Any warning and you get to the wagons. They will be on the east bank. If you can't join up, scatter and make your way back here as best you can."

William Campbell raised his hand and asked, "You think there will be trouble, Zach?"

"Not really. The Sioux are away north on the fall hunt and shouldn't be a problem. I am not aware of anybody to the south or east of us, but I don't want to be overconfident and get someone killed. Anyway, it's good training, which is also what this is about."

With the end of questions, the meeting broke up and the troopers scattered to pack and say their farewells. “Advisor, huh?” was Sarah’s parting shot to Zach, who blushed at the implication.

At 3:00pm that afternoon, the troops were assembled near the wagons with their gear stacked at their feet. Edwin Johnson went down the line, inspecting the bundles. He tossed some items to the side as unnecessary and recommended adding others. When he started with the girls, he opened the first bag, quickly slammed it shut and blushing, asked Sarah to inspect the clothing of the girls, amid a ripple of laughter. He did finish inspecting their equipment, while Sarah made sure that there were enough, but not too much clothing and toiletries.

‘Doc’ White gave Jenny a final check-up and pronounced her fit to go, but indicated he thought her foolish, if she did. He checked the medical kit, along with Paula Ericson and Trace Cemic, the medic trainees for the expedition.

After the gear was stowed in the wagons, they were dismissed and the troopers returned with their families to the Settlement.

Zach organized the camp so that his and Sarah’s tents faced each other and Seven Troop was behind him and Troop E was behind Sarah.

Early the next morning the last watch went from tent to tent shaking them to wake up the occupants. With a lot of grumbling, stretching and yawning, the two troops met at the cooking fires to wolf down a hasty breakfast of fried eggs and bacon, along with tea or coffee and toast. Within a half-hour the camp had been torn down and the area policed. The troops mounted and were ready to ride. Mike’s squad, along with Luther, took point and led off. Five minutes later the wagons rolled out the entryway, followed

five minutes later by Jeannine's and Amanda's squads.

They reached the river early in the afternoon and Luther determined the end points of the drive. He, later asked Zach if he had done it right, but all Zach would say was that they would find out.

"This is your expedition, Lute, you make the decisions. I'll only step in if I think you are really in the wrong and it would endanger the party, other than that, old son, it's your show."

The plan that had been formulated at the Settlement was put into play. The two troops took turns building the two 'corks', as Sarah named them, at the north and south ends of the drive zone. The troopers not involved in the building were assigned to scout or to camp duties. Ted Costler and Grace Johnson brought back meat from a cow they had killed while scouting to the south of camp. When Zach, jokingly, approached Sarah about their lack of chaperone, she smiled and said that she had okayed it. That night, Ted and Grace approached Zach about marrying them then and there.

Zach refused, saying that the Settlement had betrothal protocols. The engagement would be posted in the village for three weeks before the wedding. This was to give the prospective bride and groom time to think it over, set up living quarters and prepare for the wedding. He closed his left eye and looked at them with raised eyebrows and asked if there was a reason for the hurry-up wedding. Both colored brightly and hastily informed him that there was no need to get married immediately.

The work on the 'corks' and the 'fence' took the better part of four days and stretched six miles along the river where the forage was lush with stem cured summer grass. On the morning of the fifth day, the drive began. Clarence Compton had built two-dozen 'noise-makers' to drive the cattle.

They consisted of a board two inches wide, one inch thick and eight inches long, with a five-inch board attached to it with a leather hinge. The users flap the device and the smaller board smacks onto the larger, making a clacking sound.

By noon, the cattle had begun to bunch in front of the drive. Several attempts to escape the river bottom were turned back and there was only one serious charge by a huge bull with a wide spread of horns. Stephen Parker had been crowding the recalcitrant bull. It had wanted to break back, but the clacking and, occasional, snap of a rope end had kept it headed north. An hour or so later, it broke around a tree and gored the horse and smashed into Stephen's leg, breaking it in two places. Fortunately, Ted Costler was nearby and was able to drive the bull off. The horse was put down.

The drive was halted while Stephen and his gear were taken to the wagons and Trace was summoned. Stephen's leg was set and he was made as comfortable as possible in the first wagon. By the end of the day, there was only a little over a mile to go before the north 'cork' was reached and Luther called it a day. He had logs snaked to form a barrier to the south and three troopers were assigned to patrol and try to keep any cattle from returning to their old bedding grounds.

Stephen was in a lot of pain and Paula gave him a shot of the precious morphine. She and Trace reported that the break was bad and he needed to return to the Settlement as soon as possible. The expedition leaders met and decided that, with only a day left in the drive, they would push ahead and finish the drive and then make all the speed they could back to the Settlement, if Stephen thought he could hold on. When they presented their proposal to Stephen, he agreed to grit it out.

The next morning, Paula was detailed to attend to Stephen and the rest went back to work with a will. By mid-morning, the drive had reached the northern ‘cork’ and the cattle and the few buffalo had begun to swarm onto the plain. Luther assigned Stan’s squad to dismantle the ‘corks’ and call in the southern scouts to join them as soon as possible.

When Stan rejoined the wagons, he had news. Ed had spotted riders to the south, heading their way.

“There are twenty-one of them,” he reported. “They weren’t Sioux and he didn’t think they were Mormons, they looked more like Hispanics, from what I could tell. The leader looked like he had on a fancy uniform, all white with a red stripe running along his pants seam.

“One of the men noticed something up this way. When I looked back, I saw a lot of dust from the drive. They picked up their pace and I got out of there. When I met Stan, we hurried to catch up as fast as possible.”

“Damn,” swore Zach. He turned to Luther and asked, “Well, what do we do?”

Luther took a quick survey of the terrain and replied, “Stan, take your squad and get into the swale over to the east. Take Jeannine’s squad with you. Don’t show yourself, but be ready to open fire, if there is trouble.

“Mike, take the rest and hunker down in that stand of trees to the west. Same thing, be ready, but don’t shoot first.

“Oh, if I raise my right fist above my head, Mike and Stan, each of you fire one shot into the air.”

The troops snatched their rifles and extra ammunition from the wagon and galloped to their assigned stations. Stephen was given his rifle and a box of shells and a row of blankets and tents was shoved against the side of the

wagon from which the strangers should come. Sarah climbed in beside him with her rifle.

Zach, Peter Campbell and William Campbell unloaded several crates and tent rolls from the wagon and built a barricade. By the time they had finished, the strangers had ridden into sight. Zach sat down on one of the crates, while the Campbell's and Luther lay down behind their makeshift bulwark.

The riders did, indeed, look Hispanic. They sported large mustaches and wore jeans and white cotton shirts. The man in the white uniform had a thin and haughty face. He raised his arm to bring his men to a halt and spoke in Spanish to Zach.

Zach nodded and smiled, saying, "I don't understand a word that you are saying. Do you speak English, by any chance?"

The man waved one of his men forward as a translator. "I speak English, senor, I am Miguel. This is Colonel Don Marcus Alphonso de Maria de Elezar, sub-commander for the Northern District of the Aztec Empire of Mexico. You are trespassing on our land and he demands that you surrender yourselves. You will be transported to the provincial capitol city of Albuquerque and then onto Mexico City to stand trial."

"Well, that is all well and good, but we don't recognize the Aztec Empire of Mexico and we, certainly, don't recognize any claim to this land except that of the United States of America. If you persist in this charade, I will place YOU under arrest."

As the Miguel translated for the Colonel, Don Marcus' face tightened in fury and he spat back at the translator.

Miguel turned to Zach and said, "The Colonel is not pleased at your

little joke. We have a score of men to your, uh, six. You cannot hope to defeat us, so why spend your lives needlessly. Besides, the United States of America no longer exists. Your cities were destroyed by the bombs, your military has disbanded or been destroyed. Your government was destroyed by the WashingtonD.C. bomb. Be reasonable. Surrender and we promise you will be well treated.”

Zach raised his right fist above his head and was rewarded by two shots, one from the east and the other from the west. The startled Mexicans fought to control their mounts and the Colonel settled back in his saddle while his men looked nervously around. Zach lowered his arm and said, “Miguel, tell the Colonel that there are forty rifles trained on him and his men. Any attempt to arrest us will result in their slaughter. You are all out in the open and make wonderful targets. We are all equipped with the same guns, which have laser sites. The minute we open up, your pack horses and mounts will sidle around and it will be difficult to control them and fire, too.”

Miguel translated and the Colonel snapped back at him. Miguel appeared to be reasoning with his leader and several others joined him in the discussion. Finally, the Colonel made a chopping motion with his quirt to cut the argument short and made a final statement.

“The Colonel has decided that bloodshed between us will serve no purpose. He will allow you to leave our land, if you promise never to return. We will take the cattle you have collected and we can ride our separate ways.”

“Tell the Colonel that I have decided not to arrest you, in the name of the United States Government and allow you to leave peaceably, if you promise never to return.”

“Zach, what are you doing?” William, Sr. whispered. “Let’s just get

out of here.”

Zach waved a silencing hand at him and waited for the heated discussion between the Mexicans to end. The Colonel looked furious, but finally nodded to Miguel.

“Senor, my Colonel says you have not heard the last of this. We, officially, claim the land between the Yucatan Peninsula and the old Canadian border as territory belonging to the Aztec Empire of Mexico. You may go, but my Colonel reminds you that you are subjects of the Empire and any resistance will be met with a strong response.

”He will report to the Governor and a delegation will be sent to accept your fealty to the Emperor, Jesus Moreno I.”

The Colonel snapped a salute to Zach and wheeled his horse. Followed by his men, he galloped south.

Luther and the Campbells jumped up, grinning and slapped Zach on the back. Zach just shook his head. He knew that the ‘delegation’ would be an army prepared to destroy them. The Colonel would never take these insults lightly, especially in the light of his men seeing him back down.

When Luther started to call in Troops Seven and C, Zach forestalled him. He wanted to make sure that the Aztecs were gone. He had Luther ride out to Mike’s position and take several men to follow and make sure they didn’t circle around.

Zach waited until Luther and his men had ridden out of sight before he signaled the rest to come in. He ordered the wagons reloaded and the drive to continue to the Settlement.

“This means war, doesn’t it, Zach?” Sarah queried as he stood staring after Luther.

“Huh?” he broke his reverie. “Yeah, looks that way. But, we will have a month or so to prepare, maybe even until spring, if the snow comes early.”

A somber group headed back to the Settlement with the herd, cutting out the dozen or so buffalo. They rode slowly out of concern for Stephen, who had developed a fever, and to give Luther time to rejoin them. Mike and Stan took turns as a screen towards the south. The squads of Troop C took turns as a screen towards the north. Luther rejoined them with the next day and reported that the Aztecs had continued south.

By the time they reached the valley, Stephen was delirious and was immediately transported to ‘Doc’ White. After two hours of surgery on the leg, ‘Doc’ indicated that with rest and a treatment of antibiotics he would recover, but there may be a question about his fully using the leg again. Paula volunteered to watch over him and Zach had the irrelevant thought that there may be more banns announced by the time the patient recovered.

William Smith, his broad, black face a picture of concern, arrived soon after the surgery was completed and informed Zach that a town meeting was being called. Not only was the Aztec Empire of Mexico on the agenda, but also there was news from east about the Mahdists.

Chapter 18

Survival

Fall 2041

Can't seem to catch a break here. I figured that we had arrived at the crossroads, which would let me take off. The Settlement was stabilizing, there was strong leadership and, with the advent of the settlers from the Mormon Territories, there was a military leadership. I was going to see if Sarah would marry me (big surprise to me, too.) and we would go away together. That has all gone into the trash, now. Or maybe, I think I am indispensable.

Some group calling itself the Aztec Empire of Mexico is claiming all of the land from Mexico to the Canadian border. I will have to send a message to the Mormons and Two Wolves. That ought to interest them no end. They have threatened to send a 'delegation' to accept our fealty, so we can expect an army sometime in the next year. Hopefully, they won't be able to mobilize before next spring. That will give us some time to come to a decision. With the Mahdists in the east, Fundamentalists in the Southeast, the Sioux to the north and northeast, the only direction we could safely go was south-southwest. Now, that looks like it is out of the question, unless we want to live under this Aztec Empire. Looks like we will have to fight. Oh, yes, did I mention that the Mormons told Matt about a bunch of folks on the west coast?

The good news is that we have enough cattle to last through our annihilation. Maybe, we can get the Sioux to give us a hand against the

Empire. Or, maybe, the Empire is not that strong and can't do anything about us. Right. I'll recommend a council of war to run things. Ed can run it and have Jimmy Pinder, Stretch Linder, Harry McGregor, Seth Witherspoon, Jerry Carter and Hans Minkema as his aides. Those guys fought during the invasion and they might have some ideas on how to defense this thing.

On top of all of this, I don't like how William Smith sounded about the Mahdists. What are they doing, now? I would think that they couldn't have taken over Chicago, Detroit and the other Great Lakes cities they are warring with. Maybe, they got beat and are moving west to resettle. Well, the only way to tell is to go to the meeting.

The meetinghouse was crammed to capacity. Zach thought about the need for finding a bigger room or knocking down a wall or two to be able to fit everyone. The rules could be changed to a one family, one vote rule, but that would lead to all sorts of complaints. Zach shook his head as if to dislodge these thoughts. He noticed several new faces and hoped that the scouting parties had found new areas to settle or the food supply would be impossible to sustain. He sat in the seat that Sarah had saved for him. She took his hand and the move was greeted by knowing smiles from his surrounding friends. Zach mentally shrugged and squeezed her hand.

William Smith gaveled the meeting to order. He hadn't lost the harried look he had when Zach first saw him. He asked Father Tillford to open the session with a prayer, which was surprising, as it had never been done before.

When he was finished, William banged his gavel again and said, "We have a lot to cover, folks. Some of it pretty important. I would like to start

with Zach and his report of the Aztec Empire of Mexico. Zach?”

Sarah nodded to him as he rose and made for the podium. He quickly recounted the cattle drive and the subsequent meeting with the Aztec Colonel. Even though most knew about the new situation, there was a general hubbub over the news, until William jumped up and gaveled the assembly to quiet. Zach continued with his opinion that the Empire couldn't mount an expedition until sometime in the spring, if it snowed early. At this time, he also proposed a war council, led by Edwin Johnson and aided by the Border Patrol officers. There wasn't much discussion and the motion was passed.

William thanked Zach and signaled to a lean, bearded man to come forward. He introduced him as Pete Lincoln.

When he hesitated, William made shooing motions and he approached the podium. After clearing his throat several times, he gripped the sides of the podium with his sinewy hands and hung on for dear life. He started by thanking the community for taking him and his family in, along with the several other families that came in after him.

“I'll make this short and sweet. I lived in a little town outside of Lincoln. Three weeks ago the Mahdists attacked. I was able to hide out, with my family, but I couldn't escape. They had the town surrounded and were going through it house-by-house. They brought out anyone they found and questioned them, separately. We watched all of this from the bell tower of the community college. It was pretty bad, after they questioned them, some were shot and others weren't.

“From what I learned here, the people they shot were the old, people who held political office, attorneys, teachers, clergy, gays, those kind of people. A friend of mine flipped the interrogator off and he was shot. I saw

one guy shake his head and they shot him. Anyway, they wiped out a lot of the citizens and held the rest of them in a compound. We were able to dodge them by keeping on the move. We thought we were safe until they fired the town.

“Yes, when they were through with the killing, they burned the town. One of the others can tell you why.

“That’s our story. We would like to stay here and help build a new country, if you will have us.”

After he sat down, William called on another survivor of the Mahdists. Her statement threw light on the situation.

“Our story is much the same. We were interviewed and had the choice to join the Mahdists or die. My sons were conscripted into the army and that saved their sister and me. They said that they were burning our town to purge us from the evils of town life. They were going to make the Caliphate an agrarian society. The only city which would remain was New Mecca, the seat of the religion and government.

“We were all assigned to clear the rubble after the fire. That and to attend classes in the Muslim religion. My sons were assigned to training, with the other boys who were conscripted, with the army. Their commander was a secret alcoholic and, one night, they managed to get assigned to guard duty together. They killed the officer of the guard and stole horses and food, found us and we all escaped.

“They told my sons that they were preparing for a Jihad against the Sioux and you people, the Kaafir, unbelievers. They had butchered the gangs in the north, around the Great Lakes. With that danger eliminated, they were free to attend to the west.”

She sat down and there was a deathly silence. Even the Governor, William Smith, sat for a few minutes contemplating her words before he rose again and stood at the podium. He faced the townspeople and called for questions.

Seth Witherspoon stood and said, “Looks like we are in a sea of misery, here. We have the Mahdists, the Sioux, these Fundamentalists and, now, the Aztec Empire surrounding us. We can relocate to the mountains, south of us, but there is no way we can support ourselves there. So, we break up into smaller communities, ripe for the picking; join the Mormons, who don’t particularly want us; submit to the Empire, which may be a option or not, depending on what they plan for us; submit to the Mahdists and become Muslim and fight for them in their wars with the Empire or the Sioux, and later, the Fundamentalists. The only other option, I can see, is to fight.

“If they attack the Sioux first, we can either join the Sioux or see if they can stop the Mahdists on their own. Even if they do, they will still have to face the Empire and I don’t think they have the strength to win both wars.

“If they attack us first, we can fight. Here or deeper in the mountains. I’ve gone with Four Troop on a few scouts. This won’t be an easy place to take, but we should figure that it would be taken, so we need to cache supplies deeper in and move the non-combatants there, when the time comes. They will be as safe as they can be and the rest can hold the Muslims off until we win, die or winter forces them to retreat.

“I don’t want to live under any religious fanatics, whether Christian, Muslim or Mormon. I know what the Empire will make of us, slaves to work the fields or mines. They hate Americans worse than anything and always have killed or enslaved us whenever they can.

“People,” he said, turning to sweep the audience with his gaze, “we don’t have much choice, but to fight. I agree with Zach, there. The Empire won’t be up to much until next spring and, maybe, neither will the Mahdists. They have to finish conquering the rest of the area between there and here. That should take them through the winter and they have to have enough forces to protect against the Fundamentalists, the Sioux and any remnants in the Great Lakes area. This will require a pretty large army, so they will have to take time to raise and train that number of men.”

He abruptly sat down and William called for more comments or questions.

“I have a comment,” said another newcomer, Wade Hampton. “My story is pretty similar to Mr. Lincoln’s and Mrs. Carlisle’s. But, I suggest another route. America is known for its ability to compromise. I think we should send a delegation to the Mahdists and propose just such a compromise. We could offer to be part of their domain.”

At this point a few angry shouts drowned him out, until Governor Smith banged for order and chastised the hecklers for trying to shout down the speaker. “We are based on the rule of Free Speech, look at the Constitution, and, no matter how we disagree, everyone will have their say, everyone. Go ahead, Mr. Hampton.” To anyone who knew him, it was significant that William addressed the speaker formally. It showed that he was in strong disagreement with what he was saying.

Clearing his throat and bowing to William, Wade Hampton continued, “As I was saying, we offer to be part of their domain, but an autonomous one. We would retain our own laws and, if necessary, pay taxes and offer a limited number of our troops to them to aid in their wars. We

would probably have to accept a governor of their choosing and, nominally, take their religion, but it would ensure our continued existence until such time as we are strong enough to regain the full measure of our freedoms.”

When he had returned to his seat, John Tesh stood up and said, “I’m only a pig-farmer, but I have a problem with Mr. Hampton’s position. Rather than being conquered by the Mahdists, he is suggesting that we deliver ourselves up. Now, given my experience with the Mahdists, I can’t imagine that they would ever let us keep our own laws and settle for a simple governorship. We may be great compromisers, but religious fanatics aren’t known for that. It’s their way or the highway.

“I can’t see that they would let us govern ourselves, defend ourselves or keep the fruits of our own labor. We would be slaves to them as much as we would be to the Empire, if we offered a similar proposal to them.

“There doesn’t seem to be any real choice except to fight. Our forefathers did it and, despite horrific problems, won their freedom. I think its time to copy them, fight to win or die trying.”

He sat down to a chorus of cheers and applause.

William Smith let this go on for a time, and then gaveled the meeting back to order. “Any more? If not, then lets continue on to committee reports.

John Tesh said the memorial was coming along and that the Peligrino brothers were almost finished with the carving and they had two troopers as apprentices, learning the trade.

Rafael DeLeon reported that the amount of coal and wood was sufficient for the winter and, with the finding of another seam of coal, fuel shouldn’t be a short-term problem. The log splitter was a great help in getting the fuel supplies ready. He said that there was not a great need for new

equipment, since a large quantity of tools had been salvaged from Rawlins.

Ed Johnson said the black powder weapons and kits were ready, once they were able to get a reliable source of powder. The few boxes they had found in Rawlins wouldn't be enough. There were several of the auxiliaries who showed an aptitude for use of the bow, but a source of shafts and bows was necessary. Simon Pelegrino and Sven Beckstrom had been working to make harnesses, saddles and boots, but that the effort was still in the 'Work in Progress' stage.

Hunter Williams said that they had a series of designs for the new flag ready, pointing to a wall at the back of the hall. A sheet, which had been covering a section of the wall, was removed showing five drawings of flags and a rendering of the guidon. He wanted everyone to look over the drawings and they would vote next meeting. The guidon was a swallow-tailed pennant 20" high by 30" long. There was a six-inch stripe next to the pole and a number centered on the white field. Hunter explained that the guidon stripe for numbered troops would be green and the guidon stripe for troops indicated by a letter would be yellow.

The Parkers reported that the corn and vegetable crops were doing well, but the wheat was stunted. There would be enough food, if the harvest was dried or canned, to last through the next year. The seeds from the second Rawlins expedition would be started in a hot house that was being built with windows taken from unused buildings and an old wood-burning stove. They felt that the soil was not good enough for wheat or that it was planted too late. Winter wheat was being looked at and, again, they requested that the land outside the valley entrance be farmed.

Governor Smith agreed to bring this request to the Council.

Tom Schummer reported that several bolts of cloth had been spun and woven and praised the work of Charlie Wright, the Wards and Bill Santini in building the spinning apparatuses. The supply of wool was enough to keep the weavers going and he anticipated an increase when spring brought the new crop of lambs and young alpacas. The cloth was being used to make blankets, shirts, pants and coats.

The cattle situation was reported as excellent, with the addition of several hundred more from the latest expedition. The culls from the latest herd were being slaughtered and the hides and hooves, which were to be boiled down for glue, were being saved and the meat not needed for immediate consumption, was being dried in the smokers which Gene Daley had manufactured out of several old refrigerators. The smoke houses were nearly finished and would increase the capacity for drying. There, also, were enough pigs to begin slaughtering and preserving them. Some was smoked and the rest was being preserved in salt brought back by the Mormon Expedition.

The miller, Kendall Shea, said that the mill was ready for processing of the wheat and corn. He was working on a thresher, but would be using the ancient method of a threshing floor, while the bugs were being worked out.

Jason Costler, of Two Troop, reported that a new outcrop of coal had been found and, what looks like a quartz seam of gold, was located. Several samples of minerals had been located, but it would take time to test what they were. A small valley, which had a stream and a series of caves, was discovered about five miles deeper into the mountains. There was a minimum of roadwork needed to access the valley. The soil seemed to be deep and a sample was brought back for the farmers to inspect.

Stephen Young, of Three Troop, reported that they had not found anything of interest, except a large stand of trees and some beaver ponds along a creek. They had brought back several pelts.

Five Troop, headed by Ed Reisel, found a large valley in the middle of the range. It had deer and beaver and a chain of lakes, formed by beaver dams. The soil was thick and black. Alvin Young was excited about the fertility of the soil. The only problem would be the amount of work it would take to build a road there.

“Well, we certainly have some things to think about,” said the Governor after the committee reports were finished. He recapped the discussions and asked everyone to think about how the community should handle the various situations. He thanked them and the meeting broke up.

Chapter 19

Preparations

Fall 2041

The harvest is in and everyone seems happy with it. The communal kitchen is buzzing with pressure cookers and William Smith is loading up the shelves with canned carrots, peas, beans, spinach, kale, okra, tomatoes and a host of other vegetables and meats. The smoke houses are hung with hams, beef and sheep. Paula and Margaret Tesh are putting up mincemeat, not one of my favorites. We have, probably, the widest range of dried beans and peas anywhere: Lima beans, green peas, kidney beans, navy beans, white beans, pinto beans and a lot more. Brings to mind the old Global Warming Scare at the turn of the century about flatulent cows. There are fresh peaches, apples, pears and plums. Seeds have been preserved for next spring. With the addition of BlackValley (I didn't pick the name, it was named for the rich black soil), our crop output should be increased even more. Tom Schummer is trying out several formulas for glue, made from the hooves of cattle, for use in canning lids. We'll see what happens with that.

There was a flurry of engagements. Ted Costler and Grace Johnson, Stephen Parker and Paula Ericson, Tom Russell and Ruth Johnson, Stanley Compton and Tammy Parker and Sam Tesh and Gina Peligrino. There was a sprightly discussion about Gina and Sam. Her family thought she was too young, but she took the wind out of their sails when she confided in them that they were going to be grandparents.

Charlie Wright and Hannah Dodge also caused some talk. It will be our first mixed marriage and I can imagine what Parson Simons would have said, if he were still around. Hannah was so obviously happy that it was hard to gainsay her the man of her choice, not that anyone could or would do that, in the first place. Carlo Peligrino and Jan Russell and John Massoglia and Simone Vogel, also announced their engagement. It wasn't until I got a lot of handshakes, slaps on the back and hearty congratulations did I find out that Sarah had put our names in for the reading of banns. I will have to watch that woman, she IS sneaky. One of these days I will have to ask her to marry me.

We have assigned troops to clear the roads to BlackValley, BeaverValley and CaveValley. I see why early settlers in this country weren't too imaginative about names. When the roads are open, especially to BlackValley, we will assign families to build there. They will have to live in log cabins until we get a sawmill built. Charlie Wright says that he and his apprentices will try and build a sawpit, like in the colonial days, to start with. He says that finding steel wide and long enough to make saw blades was going to be the most difficult part.

We had an early snowfall. It was pretty light, but the nights are really getting cold. Good. That should keep the Mahdists and the Empire at home. A defense committee was formed to tackle the work needed to defend us against our enemies, made up of Edwin Johnson, the scouts and the Troop leaders.

Zach was looking for Matt around the smoke house and slaughter area, where the work roster indicated he was assigned during his time off from

patrol duty. As he approached the slaughter pen, he was struck by an oddity in the situation. He stopped and looked around and then he realized what he had noticed; one man was walking around the hog butchering tables and fastidiously avoiding the puddles of blood. Zach smiled to himself at the man's actions; after all, everyone was wearing hip waders from the sporting goods store in Rawlins. His smile faded when he observed that Wade Hampton was not bothered by walking through the sheep and cattle blood.

Zach squatted on his haunches, pulling out a stem of dried rye grass and began to chew it as he observed the situation. He watched Wade pick up a haunch of beef, swing it over his shoulder and head to the salting barn. Again, he avoided the hog slaughter area. After Wade had deposited the beef, leaving it to the salters to cut up and pack, he headed back to the beef slaughter area, again. Ed Tesh called out to him, waving him over to help with an unruly pig, but Wade pointed to the beef area and walked on, again, avoiding the hog's blood.

Zach got up and strode to the supply shed where he donned a pair of waders and headed towards Ed Tesh.

"Morning, Ed," he greeted him. "Looks like you have a little problem with that pig. Want some help?"

"Yeah, could use some. I asked Wade, but he was busy, I guess."

After helping Ed, Zach found Matt and they discussed the patrols for the next few weeks, in light of the weather. They agreed that some of the younger troopers should get a chance and Matt would submit a new schedule that afternoon. When Matt asked Zach what was on his mind and snapped his fingers in front of Zach's face, Zach brought his attention back to their conversation with a start, realizing that he had been staring at Wade Hampton,

and said it was nothing.

The Defense Committee met early the next afternoon. Zach was invited, but he tried to decline, on the grounds that he hadn't been assigned, but was overruled. They were scheduled to meet in the Council Room. When they arrived, the other members of the Committee were already seated around the council table. The chamber had an uncomfortable silence and Wade Hampton, who had not been invited, was sitting in the mayor's seat looking smug. When Ed informed him that this was a closed meeting, Wade took it as a joke and indicated that everyone should be allowed. Ed, firmly, but politely, asked him to leave. Luther Smith and Ed Reisel helped him from his chair and escorted him from the room and the building, when he refused. Luther called to Greg Haakon and Josh Blaine, who were passing by, and asked them to get several other troopers and mount a guard around the building. They soon returned with a grumbling Pietro Conti and Boris Burchinski. Luther warned them about Wade Hampton and rejoined the Committee.

After a preliminary assessment of the situation, they assigned the troops to build the road to BlackValley. The mason, Todd Sinclair and Leif Ericson, the miner would go with the initial survey group to determine what was needed. Later, as many as could be spared from the harvest and slaughtering would try to punch the road through before the real winter set in.

"What really worries me," stated Ed, opening up another topic, "is the vulnerability of the entrance to the Pasture." The lower valley had acquired that name, over the past few months. "Any barricade can be smashed by a small tank or, even, a Deuce and a half truck. The narrow ditches would be easy to bridge. Once they are in the valley, there is no place to stop any invader short of the road up to the Settlement. We would lose any herds and

that would deny us food and give to it the enemy. We have to find a way of denying the entrance for a long enough time to get the herds to the upper valley. Any suggestions?"

Zach raised his hand and was recognized by Ed. "We don't have anything that could stop heavy vehicles. Even RPGs would be able to blow a sizeable hole in a palisade, if they were concentrated on a single spot. What about a deeper and wider ditch? It would be a big one, several feet wide and four or five feet deep.

"What I'm thinking of is a barricade, not too strong, in front of the ditch. Any vehicle that would plow through it would have to have some speed and it couldn't stop before it fell into the ditch. The ditch would have to be wide enough so the vehicle's momentum wouldn't be enough to bridge it, but to fall in, nose first, building another barrier."

"A tank trap, of sorts," commented Hans Minkema. "Might work, but what about getting in and out. If we have a bridge, we would have to defend it and it would be a weak spot. The bridge there now is easily dismantled, but a wider ditch requires a longer bridge with strong supports"

"Why couldn't the bridge be collapsible?" offered Stretch Linder. "We could rig the bridge so that it collapsed in pieces in the ditch or, even, have it built like a drawbridge. Yeah, a drawbridge"

"With a drawbridge, you have to have towers to support the machinery. A shell or two could slam those and they would fall into the ditch and bridge it. How about a sliding bridge. We build the bridge to be hauled by ropes from a pulley system on this side of the ditch to move it over the ditch. When we are threatened, we could haul it back to uncover the ditch. To cover the fact that there is a ditch, we build a rolling gate to complete the

barrier,” Ed shot out in one excited gasp.

The Committee debated the feasibility of a drawbridge and Mike Stewart went to find Andy Scales, who was a better engineer. The matter was tabled until they returned.

Stephen Young, tentatively, raised his hand and was recognized by Ed. He suggested that a small herd be established in the valley that Jason Costler had found. Ed asked Jason to describe the valley with the caves in more detail for the Committee.

“Well, the valley is probably a mile long and a thousand yards wide and it tapers to points at both ends. There were six caves along the west side. Two could be used to store feed, hay and such, for the animals, when the snow got too deep. Three were pretty small, but could be used for supplies and the last one was long and narrow. It was high enough to stand up in, but not much more. We could fix that up into a bunkhouse. Maybe build a small building in front of it, for a fireplace. There were plenty of rocks to build the building.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Stephen took over. “The valley has about 20 acres of rich pasturage and we could run 100-150 animals. The grass is ready to hay, now. There is plenty of water and there was plenty of game, wood and water for both the herders and animals.”

Three Troop was assigned to escort Mike Pelegrino, Paul and Michael York, Bill Santini and Giovanni and Paolo Conti to look the place over. They were to take tools to clear the road, start on making the caves habitable and cutting hay and putting up hayricks. They would leave in three days and send word back in seven on their progress.

Stretch was about to speak, when Andy Scales returned with Mike.

The Committee outlined the idea of a rolling bridge and Andy asked a few questions before excusing himself to draw up some plans and inventory supplies to decide the best way to build it, if it was possible at all.

When he left, Stretch took the floor and said, “This idea of opening up CaveValley has some merit. We, probably, could fix up the caves to be habitable; cut enough hay for the winter, but the herders would be stuck there until spring. The snow will bury any roads and only snowshoes or skis could be used to get in or out. It will be a rough time, believe me. I would recommend that families be assigned. One cattleman, at least, and a couple of troopers and their wives and children. I don’t think that we should send any single men or women.

“They should bring along a lot of text and reading books and some games. It would be a good idea to have one of the medics, too.”

The rest of the Committee agreed and suggested that a call go out for volunteers.

The Committee discussed setting up deadfalls and other traps along the trails to Black, Cave and BeaverValleys to slow down any push, if the enemy got past the entrance to the Pasture.

When the meeting broke up, Seth Witherspoon took Zach and Ed Johnson aside. “I don’t like that Wade Hampton. He tries too hard and he is asking a lot of questions about weapons, troop strength and plans. And, he spends a lot of time hiking in the hills, says he is just out for exercise. It may be that he is trying to be helpful, but I don’t know.”

Zach looked at Ed and agreed with Seth’s evaluation. They decided to assign Matt to watch over him, quietly, to see what he did. They didn’t like the idea of spying on one of their own, but the safety of the Settlement was

too important to ignore their suspicions. Zach said he would speak with Matt and they left.

Father Tillford announced that there would be a 'wedding weekend' in three weeks. When someone suggested that all the couples be married in one ceremony, he demurred, saying that marriage was a sacred sacrament and not a group operation. The day was special and each couple should have their own ceremony. Saturday would be the wedding day for the younger couples and Sunday was reserved for the older ones. The reception would be Sunday night for everyone.

There was a flurry of activity to prepare for the nuptials, with Belinda Rush's home the center of activity for wedding dresses and Mish Burchinski in charge of the wedding cakes.

The survey party for the Black Valley road returned in time for the ceremonies and a festive air pervaded the settlement as Wedding Saturday, as it was known, dawned.

Ted Costler and Grace Johnson were married at 10:00, Stephen Parker, still looking pale and limping, and Paula Ericson wed at 12:00. Two hours later, Stanley Compton and Tammy Parker tied the knot, followed by Tom Russell and Ruth Johnson and Sam Tesh and Gina Peligrino at 4:00 and 6:00, respectively.

A cluster of houses had been prepared for the newly weds and the shivarees continued late into the night. William Smith had released several cases of wine from the Commissary and the Pellegrino's had found a store in Rawlins that sold brewing supplies and they had whipped up several batches of home-brew. The homemade wine was still aging, according to the vintners.

A more subdued community assembled the next morning for Sunday weddings. There were more than a few hangovers being nursed. There had been much drinking and several men swore they would never touch a drop again. 'Doc' White dispensed aspirin with lectures on the evil of drink. Zach felt that he was being hypocritical, since he had been one of the last of the partiers to leave and his consumption of alcohol had been close to epic. The most irritating part of it was that he looked fresh as if he had a good night's rest and was much too cheerful for the sufferers.

Charlie Wright and Hannah Dodge were the first of the couples to be married. Charlie looked strange in a suit; having worn only insulated underwear tops, jeans and an apron since setting up the blacksmith shop. He kept tugging at the collar of his shirt. Hannah looked radiant in a white, cotton dress, enhanced by lace at the collar and cuffs. She was a slight woman, next to Charlie's bulk, but everyone knew who would run that household.

Carlo Peligrino and Jan Russell were next, at noon. She looked pale and had confided in Sarah that she felt guilty about getting married again, so soon after her husband had been killed in Rawlins. Sarah had reassured her that she had to get on with her life. Jan clutched Carlo's hand fiercely throughout the ceremony. Walking down the aisle, she allowed a timid smile to break out as everyone cheered the new couple.

John Massoglia, looking fierce with his handlebar moustache, seemed to dare anyone to protest to his marriage to Simone, a chubby, platinum blond with a bubbly personality. John stalked up the aisle, after the ceremony, looking proudly left and right, with his new wife on his arm.

Zach and Sarah were last. They were greeted with cheers and catcalls

as they entered and walked down the aisle. Sarah turned bright red, under her auburn hair and clutched Zach's arm so hard he was afraid that she would cut off the circulation. Her "I do" was so quiet, someone in the audience shouted for her to speak up, before being shushed by the women around him. Zach made up for it by saying; "I do!" in a stentorian voice that echoed through the church. Sarah hung on to him as he kissed her and Zach waved the audience to be patient as the kiss lengthened. She, finally, let him go and turned to the cheering crowd with a smile on his face and thrust her arm through his, possessively.

The church emptied and the members of the Settlement gathered at the restaurant for the reception. All of the newly wedded couples formed a reception line and accepted the congratulations of their friends and neighbors.

The dancing and feasting went on into the wee hours of the morning and the shivarees were shorter and more subdued when the party broke up.

The next morning, Zach groaned and staggered out of bed to answer the door, flinging it open to reveal Matt Busby. He apologized for disturbing them, but he had news that couldn't wait. Zach told Matt to wait outside while he got some clothes on. Zach returned to the bedroom to get dressed and reassure Sarah that everything was all right and to go back to sleep.

"This had better be good, old son," Zach said, taking a long drink of water. "My mouth feels and tastes like the bottom of a muddy well."

"I'm sorry, Zach," answered Matt, "if it wasn't so important, I wouldn't have dreamed of waking you up, it being your wedding night, well, morning. I waited until 9:00 to let you get some sleep, anyway"

"Yeah, yeah," mumbled Zach. "Just get on with it." Zach took his irritation and sore head out on the younger man and immediately regretted his

words and apologized.

“Let’s go down to the restaurant and see if they have any coffee brewed. Maybe, there will be a drop or two of the hair of the dog,” he finished hopefully.

As they walked down the street to the center of town, Matt told him what he had found out. Wade Hampton had left the reception early and Matt had followed him into the lower valley. Near the alpaca pens, he had taken a trail up the hill and into the woods. At the top, he had headed east along the crest until he reached the Leaning Tree, an old pine that leaned out over the plain below.

While Matt hid nearby, Wade had taken a coil of rope from under a pile of stones, tied a small sack to the rope and flung the end of the sack over the cliff. After a few minutes, he began hauling the rope up. He untied the sack, hid the rope and began the return journey. Matt followed him back to the settlement and saw him enter his house. Wade hid the sack behind a loose board in his bedroom wall. Matt was able to see this because, when Hampton had closed the curtain, a corner had caught on the lampshade by the bed and left a small opening.

After he had left to return to the celebration, Matt had snuck in and retrieved the bag from its hiding place. He had found a message inside and had copied it down and returned the original and the bag to its hiding place.

He handed his copy of the message to Zach, who had forgotten all about his aching head. Zach read, “Good news. You must get information about plans for entrance. A small force will attack the back way as diversion, since it is narrow. How many fighters, weapons. Find out. Same time next week. Praise Allah, the Compassionate”

Zach lowered the note and slowly raised his eyes to meet Matt's. He spat out an expletive and said, "Good work, Matt. Keep this under your hat and loosen up the watch. Don't let him see you, under any circumstances. We know when he will contact them again and I want to intercept his next message, before he sends it. The bastard."

Matt left to let his team know the change in plans and organize for a guard around the Council Chambers. Zach, forgetting about the need for coffee, headed for Ed Johnson's home. His anger grew as he strode up the street. He took that anger out on Ed's front door, banging on the panels with a closed fist. He heard a muffled voice from inside and barking dogs. Ed yanked open the door, his hair tousled from sleep.

"Leave the door, I'll need it for winter," he snapped. "Oh, Zach, what is it? Something happen? Come in, come in," he finished as he stood aside and waved Zach in.

Zach thrust the note into Ed's hand and he turned to the kitchen, reading it and scratching his head with his other hand. Asta was up, looking like an angel, putting on the pot for tea.

After a huge yawn, he said, "Looks like we have a viper in our midst," he commented. "What do you want to do about it?"

"What I want to do is shoot the miserable bastard," Zach retorted, "but we need to let him think that he's not suspected. If we can, we should try and use him to pass on false information, maybe, set a trap for the Mahdists."

Ed agreed and said that the Defense Committee needed to take this up. Zach would track down the members while Ed got dressed and they would meet at the council chambers in an hour. Zach thanked Asta for the tea and hurried out.

Most of the Committee lived in the hotel and it took Zach no time to roust them out and tell them to meet at the City Hall at the appointed time. After cautioning them to let it seem as if a scheduled meeting was being held, Zach headed for the restaurant to get the too-long delayed coffee.

After making sure that the guards were positioned around the building, as was usual when the Committee met, Ed called for order. He read the message and a sudden silence settled on the room.

“We need to know when the attack will take place. We can’t strip the Settlement for the Black and CaveValley projects, if the attack takes place anytime soon. On the other hand, we don’t want to sit around, if the attack is planned for the spring. We would lose too much time getting ready for winter,” summarized Harry, after a long discussion had died down.

Stretch looked up from cleaning his nails with his combat knife. “Why don’t we sucker them in? Let Wade know that we are stripping Mitchell to send troops to the new valleys. He can report that there won’t be much in the way of a defensive force.”

Zach spoke up. “I would like to propose that we don’t do anything about Hampton until he makes contact again. Stretch’s idea is a good one. But, let’s tell Wade that we aren’t going to send the troops out until early in the spring. That gives us time to set up the new settlements, dig the ditch and build the retractable bridge.

“I, personally, don’t think there can be an attack anytime soon, anyway. We would detect them, even if they made a wide circle to come at the entrance from the north. At minimum, we should strengthen the watch at the back entrance to a full troop. We have a watch on the Mound, so that should give us enough warning. The most important thing is that we need to

step up work on the palisade. Let Hampton report on the weakness of the barrier, but, under no circumstances, let him know about the ditch and the drawbridge. Thankfully, we haven't started on them and Andy and Mike, hopefully, haven't said anything. We have to warn them as soon as we are done here.

“Two possibilities exist to turn this to our advantage. One, we can try and get them to send their main attack against the back entrance. We can trap them on that narrow trail and cause a lot of damage. Two, let their main assault come against the front entrance and set up a strong defense there and have a mobile force outside to cut their supply and communication lines.”

The Committee discussed Zach's proposal and decided that they couldn't inflict enough casualties on the Mahdists at the back entrance and abandoned that part of his plan. They did agree that the ditch and drawbridge wouldn't be started and nothing said of the plan, but that the palisade would be seen as their only defense at the entrance. Andy and Mike would be warned to say nothing about the bridge or ditch.

Labor on the palisade continued and, at least once a day, Wade was seen at the site, bringing water and food to the workers. Matt noted that he walked off the length of the palisade.

On the night the note had called for another exchange, Zach positioned half of Matt's troop at the trailhead and the rest were scattered along the trail in the trees to prevent an escape. Zach had cautioned them to keep absolutely quiet, but not to let him send the message, until it had been read.

Zach hated waiting and the minutes seemed like hours. Several times he felt sure that something had gone wrong, but when he checked his watch,

less than twenty minutes had gone by, each time. Finally, there was movement on the trail and the faint moonlight illuminated Wade Hampton climbing towards them. When he was opposite Zach, a trooper appeared at the head of the trail and Wade stopped. Before he had a chance to move again, Zach and several other troopers had grabbed him, covering him mouth to prevent an outcry. They quickly tied and gagged him.

The message was found and, under a closely hooded light, Zach read it, and then again.

“Palisade weak. Double gate flimsy. 2 light mgs at each corner. Approach clear, night attack. They will send most troops back to mountains to open new territory. Advise attach delayed till early spring. Strive to be worthy of Allah’s love.”

Zach stuffed the message back in the bag, hurried to the Leaning Pine, tied the bag to the rope and tossed it over the cliff edge. He whispered to Matt to carry Wade back to the Settlement and lock him in one of the cells in the police station. After a few minutes, he felt a tug on the rope and hauled it up. He heard the drum of horses fading away to the east and he read the note he had just received.

“Attack will be in spring. Trouble in Ind. We will be victorious, Allah willing. Contact in one month. Treat your brothers as Allah wills.”

The next morning, the Defense Committee met to discuss the events of the previous evening. Zach read the note and sat down to let the debate wash over him. Ed started by sounding a note of relief that they had until spring to ready their defenses. Stretch suggested that they get the entire group for CaveValley started as soon as possible. He also announced that he would be the first to volunteer. “I’m getting married to Peggy Norris and we will

need a place to honeymoon,” he quipped. After the congratulations had died down, they approved of his motion and asked him to spearhead the effort to get volunteers. If he could get them soon enough, they would leave with the troop, if not, then a few days later.

“I know we are all dodging the real issue, here,” said Edwin, after a short pause. “What do we do about Wade Hampton? To clear up our options, let me say that we can’t let him go. Even if he doesn’t know about the ditch, he still knows too much about us. That leaves incarceration or execution.”

Zach rose slowly to his feet. “Incarceration is too chancy. He could escape and leave with even more information than he has now. It is the duty of any governing body to protect its citizens, so I don’t see any choice but execution.”

After he sat back down, Hans said, “Like Zach is fond of saying, we are a tribal society. Our laws are few, but the punishments harsh. We can’t afford to let him go, I agree with that. We can’t afford to incarcerate him, because he could escape and he could influence some others to turn their coats. We have no choice but to execute him. He is a spy and a fifth columnist.

“We had a man in the Border Patrol who got paid off by some of the invaders we fought along the border. He was promised a lot of things, safety for his family, money, more. He walked off his post one night and fifteen patrolmen were killed and our lines were hurled back to Phoenix, with a lot more losses. We found him three years later, living in California with the MS-13s during a raid from Arizona, before it fell. We didn’t try him, ask him why or anything else. We killed him, shot him down like the dog he was.

“The point of this story is: we can’t have any mercy. He may not kill

anyone, himself, but his knowledge will put a lot of people in danger. Mortal danger.”

A look around the room showed that there was general agreement about this. Stretch suggested it was a military matter and it was up to them to settle it and carry out whatever sentence was decided upon, but that the trial would be open to the public and the execution, if that was what was decided, also was to be public.

Chapter 20

The CaveValley Settlement

Fall 2041

Wade Hampton has turned out to be a spy. We caught him at it red-handed. Matt gets the credit for this. There were several situations that made us suspicious, his constant curiosity about our defenses, his refusal to touch or eat pork and his disappearances. We don't have much choice but to execute him, can't have him running around loose and can't imprison him, since he may escape. I have killed before; don't get me wrong, but in the heat of a fight. Execution is a different thing. When word got out about Wade Hampton, there was a split in the community. Most figured that, if guilty, he should die, since he endangered all of us. Surprisingly, Grace O'Malley was in complete support of this. I thought that she would be on the other side of the fence. Charley Wright led the opposition, saying that we didn't have a right to take a life like this. He had never supported the death penalty. The problem was, he didn't have an alternative. He saw that freeing him or incarcerating him wasn't the answer, but he didn't know what was, other than he didn't like the idea of executing him.

The trial is planned for the end of the month. Ed Johnson will be the presiding judge; Stretch Linder, Hans Minkema, Jerry Carter and Harry McGregor will make up the rest of the panel. I was appointed as the prosecution and Wade wants to defend himself.

The good news is that we have volunteers to live in Cave and BlackValleys. Milo Campbell and his family will be there to handle the cattle;

John Massoglia and family will be in charge of the haying and truck garden; Giovanni Conti, with his four youngest, was going along to oversee construction; Ted Costler, Steven Parker and Paolo Conti would be the workforce and Stretch Linder would be in charge of defenses. It seems that we will have to replace Stretch on the bench, if he can't get back for the trial.

They would be supplied with enough canned vegetable and fruits and cured meat to last them the winter. We were sending along a couple of cases of MREs and, of course, they would have the cattle, as a last resort. Milo feels that a hundred animals should make up the herd. Ninety percent of the herd was to be beef and the rest a mix of alpaca and sheep. A boar and a sow would be, as Simone put it, their garbage disposal.

Stretch's marriage to Peggy Norris was another excuse to throw a party. Sarah was instrumental in getting them together and was very proud of her handiwork. She is a natural matchmaker and any singles had better watch out.

Grace O'Malley had her students put together performances at the school. The youngsters had songs and skits, but the older classes put on a credible Hamlet and Taming of the Shrew. On one of his scouts, Seth Witherspoon found sports equipment and an air pump in the basement of a farmhouse. It was strange, but there was very little sports equipment in Rawlins, either at the school or the sporting goods stores. We now have four basketballs, two soccer balls, an assortment of baseball equipment, two badminton sets and a croquet set. He even brought back the basketball hoop and net. Clarence Compton built a backboard and we set it up in a small warehouse. We finally found a book with the court dimensions and painted the cement floors. The troop captains want to set up teams. I am all for it, but

I don't know when they will have time to practice or play, what with the patrols, school, opening up roads, learning a trade and the maintenance work on the buildings they have to do.

The more I see this group work together, the more I want to see it succeed. These people deserve a settled life. I just hope they get it.

The CaveValley expedition waited for good-bys to be said and the final tears to be shed before Milo slapped his team with the reins to start them off. Giovanni called out to his team and followed, the wagons creaking along. The rest of the party mounted and cantered after them. Stretch and Paolo rode ahead to scout the trail and move any small obstructions they could. They each carried a long, iron bar to use as a pry when they needed to tumble rocks to the side of the road and shovels to fill in potholes and water cuts. The old dirt forestry road had been long neglected.

The road had been worked on for the first mile and a half, so there was little work, initially. After that, the two led for an hour, working steadily, clearing the road where they could or waiting for the rest of the party to help, where they couldn't. Ted and Stephen relieved them and they made slow, but steady progress for the first day. They stopped early where a small creek had cut a watercourse, which was too swift and deep to fill with dirt and rocks. Milo selected several trees, which were to be cut for a crude bridge the next morning.

After breakfast, Milo, Giovanni and Ted began the process of falling the trees, while Stretch, Stephen, John and Paolo began digging out the footings where the logs would be placed. Throughout the morning the work

progressed. The trees were felled, trimmed and bucked to the proper length. The footings were cut out of the banks and flat stones placed on which to rest the trees. The timbers were dragged down after lunch and muscled into place. Milo took an adze and began to flatten the top of the logs and even them out. By the time the bridge was ready and dirt spread in the joints, it was evening again.

Stretch insisted that the wagons be moved across, just so they could say they had made forward progress. They slept well that night and there were a lot of groans, moans and good-natured joking as they splashed frigid water from the stream on their faces the next morning.

They made swift progress for the first couple of hours, since, while Milo was shaping the logs on the bridge, the rest of them had worked on rebuilding the road on the other side. Towards the end of the afternoon, Stretch came galloping back, shouting that the valley was just over the next hill. This bolstered the rest of the party and they camped within a day's journey of their goal.

The last day, they worked harder than they had before, determined that this would be the last day they spent on the trail. Towards evening, they sat on the slope leading to their new homes. Ted and Steven rode down to the caves, along the creek, and made sure that they were uninhabited. They waved their hats to signal that the way was clear and had a roaring fire going by the time the wagons arrived. The grass was long and cured to perfection, according to John Massoglia as he tugged a handful out of the ground and buried his nose in the bunch, inhaling deeply.

John woke them up the next morning with the noise he made sharpening the three scythes they had brought along. He took each one out

and tried a few practice strokes before he was satisfied he had honed the blades to a 'T'. Simone had to tell him to sit quietly and let the others eat after he had bolted his breakfast and encouraged the others to do the same so they could get to work.

After breakfast, he took the men and Paolo out to the field and demonstrated the correct technique for cutting hay. "Don't fight it. Relax and let the weight of the blade do the work. Get a rhythm, back and cut, back and cut."

He made it look easy, but they soon found out how difficult it really was. They finally got the hang of it and broke up into two teams, John, Ted and Paolo in one and Stretch, Steven and Milo in the other. One team cut the hay and the other took axes and cut some of the aspens to make hayricks in the storage caves. When those were finished, that second team stacked the cut hay.

Giovanni began to lay out string lines to mark off the building. He had his son; Armando and Kirk Massoglia start to clear the area of brush, trees and stones. The younger children gathered wood and stacked it by the cave mouth.

Everyone was ready to take a break for lunch and they discussed when they should bring the herd in. John wanted another two days to cut enough hay to last them through the winter. His suggestion was greeted with groans from the other mowers. "I'm not sure I will survive another two days of this. Hell, I don't think I will survive today," Stretch lamented.

Milo suggested that they would need the rest of the hay, but that they couldn't possibly cut the whole valley and wanted to return for the herd in the morning. He was ribbed about just wanting to get out of the mowing

business, but he took it good-naturedly and suggested that, with the road cleared, his son Eddie could make the trip in a day. The herd should be organized and ready to move and it might take two days to bring them in. He slapped Stretch on the knee and said, “So, see. There’s plenty of time to get the hay in. It’s gonna be fun, I just know it.” Everyone shared the laugh at Stretch’s melodramatic death scene.

Giovanni suggested that they make up a list of supplies they would need, to be brought with the herd. This surprised everyone, since they had just arrived and still had plenty of supplies stored in the caves. The mason said the supplies he needed were windows, doors, lumber for bed frames, furniture for the cabin, nails, and mortar.

“You don’t realize how big I will have to make the house,” he said. “Oh, sure, the kids can sleep in the larger of the supply caves or in the main room of the house, but we have six couples, and I can only speak for myself, who might want a little privacy. Especially the newlyweds. At least I did, as a newlywed.” He gave Francesca a leer and said, “So did Francesca.”

His flustered wife told him to be quiet about private matters and threw a dishcloth at him.

“I figure I can make a couple of rooms in the cave, itself,” he continued. “We need a main room, big enough for all of us to live in. That leaves four more rooms for the adults. We can build the house tall enough for low lofts and partition those. I figure that we would need, at least, a 60 X 30 foot room with the lofts at each end. That only gives us 1800 square feet. But that would mean that we need a lot of rock and mortar, two doors, five windows and a fireplace at each end, with the chimneys passing through the lofts for warmth.

We could use a few more masons, too, but I won't ask for the moon."

Stretch pulled a piece of grass and began chewing it and spoke, "Gio, how long will this take? This building project?"

Giovanni shrugged and replied, "With all of us working and the amount of stone we have to hand, I could finish it in a month, month and a half. To build it to last forever, I would need two to three months."

"Well, we're not building the pyramids, so let's say a month and a half. That brings us up to the first of November. There won't be any problem with lumber, furniture and fixtures, since we have houses that can be torn down at the Settlement for that stuff. We could make any additional furniture; God knows we will have all winter to perfect our technique."

After more discussion, it was agreed that Eddie would be sent back for supplies and the herd. The mowing crew would continue to cut hay until the herd arrived. Giovanni was to finish clearing and marking the ground, with the help of the women and the children.

Three days later, with the fodder caves stuffed with cut hay and the winter woodpile growing, there came a faint hello from the road at the head of the valley and a stream of cattle, alpaca, sheep and wagons overflowed the lip of the valley and washed onto the valley floor.

Eddie, Peter Campbell and Darius Ngunye rode up and dismounted. They accepted water and looked around at the progress that had been made.

"Looks good," Darius commented. "You have done a lot of work in a week. The road was fine and we made it with the loss of only one head of beef. It's in the wagon. Broke a leg when it slipped on the bridge."

Two wagons rumbled into what had become known as The Yard. Big and Little Bill jumped down and, unconsciously, struck identical poses as they

viewed the valley.

They had built a retaining wall to bring the outer edge of the building area up to level. Fill had been shoveled in and Giovanni had laid flat stones as a rough floor. The fireplace at the northern end had been started and rose like a blunt finger pointing at the sky.

Unloading the wagons began immediately. The Campbells would stay a few days to assist in the building, while Peter Campbell, Darius Ngunye and Milo got the herd settled in. Milo wanted to build a couple of low dams along the stream to form drinking pools and allow easy access from the east to west banks.

Giovanni, with mortar at hand, immediately dismantled the existing portion of the north fireplace and had Paolo start mixing the concrete. He ordered the Campbell father and son to help the rest gather stone and bring it back to the building site.

That evening, events in the Settlement were discussed.

Peter Campbell reported, “A patrol had found several bodies and a wagon along the Southeast trail towards the Fundamentalist region. It looked like they had run out of water and simply died. There were no signs of draft animals, so it was surmised that they had run off. The wagon hadn’t been looted and the patrol had been brought it back to the Settlement, after they buried the bodies.

“Nothing has been done about the Wade Hampton trial. He was refusing to say anything and still wanted to defend himself. The trial would start in two weeks, as set by the Council. They had left the prisoner in the jurisdiction of the Defense Committee.

“The road to BlackValley was going slowly. There were a lot of

narrow spots that had to be widened enough for a wagon and a lot of streams to cross. The settlers went in with packhorses and were clearing land and building cabins out of the logs.

“Seth Witherspoon married Jane Washington. She still is quiet and doesn’t seem to have recovered from her ordeal. Everyone is hoping that Seth can bring her out of it.”

By the end of the week, when the Campbells and Ngnuye left, the fireplaces had been completed and tested. The north and east wall were finished and the south wall was half built. Aspen had been cut for rafters and roofing underlay. Several tall pines from higher up the mountain, had been cut for rafters and support beams for the lofts. John Massoglia was experimenting with the manufacture of shakes for the roof from pine log barks.

The cattle had settled in and Eddie Campbell, Kirk Massoglia and Armando Conti were assigned as drovers to watch over them. The boys were proud of their new jobs and the fact that they each got a rifle to carry.

Stretch had organized a hunt for a mountain lion that had killed a calf, finally trapping it against the mountain and killing it. He took the hide and meat.

As the two wagons and the outriders breached the head of the trail and disappeared, the CaveValley settlers realized that this might be the last time they saw anyone except themselves until spring. Francesca wiped her eyes on her ever present apron and banged the pan she happened to be carrying with a wooden spoon to startle the rest out of their reverie. “Come on, we got work to do and it ain’t gonna get done by itself,” she said as she went back to the kettle holding the breakfast dishes.

The rest scattered to their tasks and life in CaveValley settled into a familiar rhythm.

Chapter 21

The Trial

Fall 2041

The news from Cave and BlackValleys is good. Both seem to be settling in well. We all wish Seth the best with Jane Washington. She is still pretty moody and distracted. Unfortunately, the road to BlackValley is turning into a real engineering project and may have to be abandoned for the winter, once the snow falls. We are sending another pack train in a few days. It will carry all of the supplies for next year's farming effort. Johnson and Campbell want to clear as much land as they can, get the buildings up and, possibly, plow the ground before the snow hits. Next spring, before the Mahdists have a chance to hit us, they should have the crops in and the Black Troop – Troop 8 can be available to help with the defense.

The trial is scheduled to start in a few days. It hasn't split the community, like I thought it would, but there are a few who are uncomfortable with the death penalty. Wade hasn't been helpful. He won't talk about anything except that we will suffer for this. Seems he was a willing convert to Islam and offered to infiltrate us and either convert us or provide information that would enable the Mahdists to conquer us.

Sarah is working with Doc White as a nurse trainee. She thinks that there will be a lot of babies by this time next year. There are several others who are enrolling in the DocWhiteSchool of Medicine, as he jokingly calls it, but I think that he is secretly pleased about it. The defense committee has

decided that training medics is extremely important and we have reshuffled the troops to include one of the trainees in each one. They are relieved of normal duties, like routine patrols, the communal labor day, etc in order to study.

We are coming along with the ditch and bridge. Mike and Andy scrubbed several designs before they settled on the design to collapse the bridge in the middle. They agreed that there is a danger of damaging the panels, but to build a bridge sturdy enough for the traffic we need and it is too heavy to retract. They have built a hydraulic ram out of parts they scrounged in a trip to Julesburg. Basically, the bridge pivots at each end, there is a pair of support posts holding the center and the two sections are locked together with giant pins. The hydraulics is used to raise the bridge enough to remove the supports and then they retract and bring the bridge to its open position. Looks good on paper.

There hasn't been any more snow and it worries us, just some rain. The roads will still be passable, though the rain should slow things down. If the Mahdists, who appear to be having trouble to their east, clear up the issues, they may decide to attack before next spring. We have doubled the scouts both to the east to watch for the Mahdists and southwest to watch for the Aztec Imperials. The Council is reluctant to send out a trading party to the Mormon Lands, since it might run into the Imperials or get cut off due to the weather. Plus, I don't want a troop out when we may need them at home.

Zach wasn't sleeping well. Sarah tried to get him to relax, but there were too many things on his mind. Daily he inspected the ditch and bridge;

he watched the training of the troops, inspected the troop at the Back Door, spoke with William Smith about supplies, held debriefing sessions with returning patrols and scouts and rode out along the two new roads. He talked with the herders and farmers about the herds and preparations for the spring planting. At night, Sarah often found him asleep over volumes of Tacitus, Clauswitz, Sun Tzu, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Wellington, US Grant and a myriad of others.

Ed had come to Sarah about the situation, since Zach constantly pestered Ed about tactics and strategy. It was getting to the point where Ed dreaded seeing Zach. “Sarah, I have seen this before. Until he has his first real battle, he will be a bundle of nerves and a complete mess. When the first shot is fired, he will calm down or collapse completely. In the meantime, he needs to relax.”

“I know, Ed,” Sarah replied with tears brimming in her eyes. “He is going to get sick, if he doesn’t stop this. If we could get snow that would, at least, assure that we were safe until next spring.”

They realized that there was nothing that could be done, except to support him as best they could.

The trial started the following Monday. Jimmy Pinder replaced Stretch Linder on the judicial board, since Stretch was in CaveValley. The morning of the trial was marked by overcast skies and spitting rain. The tribunal set up in the Council Chambers and there was a full house for the trial. The judges sat at the council table. There was a table to the left for the defense and the right for the prosecution. Zach sat, doodling on the pad of paper in front of him, waiting for the prisoner to be brought in.

Finally, the court came to order and Zach made his opening

statement. In it, he outlined the offense, told of how suspicions grew about Wade Hampton and how Matt had followed him, intercepted the first message and the subsequent capture of the prisoner and the second message he carried and the one he received. When the texts were read, there was a muttering from the crowd, which Ed gaveled to quiet.

Wade Hampton rose after Zach was finished. He turned his back on the panel and faced the audience. He denounced the trial as a sham, without any legal standing. He insisted that the Settlement was part of the Mahdist Caliphate and, therefore, under Shari'a law only. He demanded that he be turned over to judges from the

High Islamist Court

to be tried. "We don't recognize, nor have we ever recognized, the Caliphate as having legal or moral power over the Settlement. Motion denied," Ed stated after a quick conference with the other members of the panel.

He tried to get the evidence thrown out, since Matt illegally searched the house, but was denied since Matt performed the search on his own. His assignment by the court was to watch only. Wade was told that he was free to swear out a complaint against Matt.

The defendant continued with the air of a man who has been doomed by a kangaroo court. He insisted that his statements regarding the Empire of Mexico and the Mahdists showed that he was in favor of the Settlement being under the sway of one or the other of these bodies, therefore, his actions were for the good of the community and should be dismissed as mistaken, at the worst.

"This body denies the motion. Stated opinions do not forgive illegal actions. If that were true, theft would be legal simply by the thief saying

thievery was bad before he stole an item.”

Wade shrugged his shoulders and appealed to the audience. He stated that, since there was no state of war declared, there was no legality in a military tribunal.

“The representative Council and members of the community have appointed us as its representatives in matters of the defense of the Settlement. A declaration of war is not necessary to require the military representatives to act, militarily, for the good of the community. Motion is denied.”

Finally, Wade made the argument that he was a citizen of the Caliphate and a representative of their government. He pulled a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and presented them to Ed, through the courts Master-at-Arms. They proved to be the portfolio of the representative of the Mahdist Caliphate to the Mahdist Province of Wyoming. They appointed the bearer as the diplomatic representative of the Caliphate in all matters between the two parties. The defendant insisted that these papers gave him diplomatic immunity and he should be released.

Zach jumped up and shouted, “In a pig’s eye, you bastard,” before Ed slammed the gavel and roared for quiet from the prosecution and the audience. Zach, still fuming, apologized and sat down. He tossed his pencil across the desk in anger.

After reading the documents, Ed and the other judges huddled to discuss them. Returning to their seats, the panel nodded to Ed who stated, “First of all, these documents were never presented; secondly, the Settlement does not consider itself a province of the Caliphate; finally, no government can open diplomatic relations with a part of its own nation. Either the Settlement is considered a foreign power, thereby able to accept diplomatic

portfolios or is considered a province, whereby it cannot accept diplomatic portfolios. Both ways, these papers have no meaning and the motion is denied.”

“Then, sir, I declare this proceeding to be illegal and immoral,” stated Wade, as he sat.

Zach called his witnesses and presented the notes and wrapped up his case in the next few hours. The only question Wade asked to each one was, “Are you familiar with Shari’a law?”

When the defense was called upon to present its case, Wade called himself as his first witness. He took the stand after swearing in and began to read the Koran aloud. Zach protested as to the relevance of this and Wade insisted that until the court understood the context of Shari’a law, it could never judge him. Ed sustained the objection and told Wade to continue.

Wade said he was through and made a motion to dismiss the charges, since he was not allowed to conduct an adequate defense.

The motion was denied.

Zach made a short closing argument, calling for the execution of the prisoner. Wade Hampton reiterated his opening statements with the same results.

The panel huddled and in short order returned with a verdict of guilty. Ed Johnson stood and addressed the prisoner, “You have been declared guilty and will be taken to a place of execution tomorrow morning and executed for your crimes. May God have mercy on your soul.”

Wade was taken away and the court adjourned. As the crowd filed out, Zach joined the judges and shook his head. “It was like he didn’t even care,” Zach said in amazement.

“He didn’t,” Ed replied. “I have seen it all before. These fanatics think that they will be rewarded in Paradise for his support of Allah. He is probably laughing at us right now. We are helping him get to his rewards sooner than later.

“You can’t fight these people. They think so differently than we do. The Crusaders would understand, they felt the same way. Dying as a soldier of God guaranteed a place in Heaven and forgiveness of all sins. I will tell you this, fanatics give me the willies.”

“So, how do we do it?” Hans asked.

“I would like to take him to the Leaning Pine and hang him as a warning, but we need him to tell us the signal he uses to verify that he is the actual communicant with those below.”

Zach smiled and said, “If he is such a true believer, maybe I can do something.”

“What?” Ed asked.

“Just an idea. I’ll let you know if it works.” Zach sprang to his feet and headed for the jail.

Twenty minutes later he was back, a grin stretching from ear to ear. In his hand he held a notebook that he threw on the table in front of Ed.

“Those are the codes for the next three messages. Both his and theirs.”

“How did you do it,” Harry asked, as Ed flipped the notebook around and read what was written.

“I just told him that we were going to hang him in the morning at dawn and that we made sure the rope slip smoothly by greasing it with lard.”

“Lard? So, what?”

“Lard is from pigs. Pigs are unclean. Unclean Muslims don’t go to Paradise.”

“No! He really fell for that? What an idiot.”

“Now wait a minute, Harry,” Hans broke in. “Just because he believes in something to that extent, doesn’t make him an idiot. You may not agree with him, but it is what he believes.” Hans turned to Zach, “You’re sure these are correct? What if he is lying to you?”

“Hans, old son, I told him that we would commute his sentence until after the next message comes. If he had lied to us, we would hang him right there, wrap his corpse in the hide of a pig, shove pork down his throat and bury him where no one would ever find him. He looked a little green around the gills after that.”

That night, he told Sarah the whole story. She laughed and called him a wicked man, but he was more relaxed than he had been in weeks. Sarah thought later that this was the night their son was conceived.

Chapter 22

Winter

Winter/Spring 2041/2042

We tried the miserable spy and convicted him. Unfortunately, we made a deal to spare him for awhile if he gave us the code he used to verify the messages sent and received. Actually, threatened him is more like it. We said we would make sure he never reached Paradise if he lied. He will still hang later, but with a clean rope and proper burial. He is a true fanatic. A truly scary fanatic. After we got the next message from the Mahdists and the code proved accurate, we hung him and he had a smile on his face.

The message stated that the re-conquest of Chicago was successful and all non-believers have been converted or eliminated. Expect them in the spring, when the roads dry. The next message will be on the first Monday in April or as near then as weather permitted.

It started to snow the week after the trial. It got brutally cold for several weeks and we have had to open up holes in the ice for the herd. We have over two feet of the white stuff and there is no way any one will attack us until spring. That gives us several months and we are using them wisely. Several of the boys and girls had birthdays and we inducted those eligible into the troops, except for CarsonDigby, who wanted to join the wagon drivers. We have been collecting quite a few of them over time, wagons, I mean. Seth Witherspoon was phenomenal with this. Every time he took a patrol out, they came back with at least one wagon, packed with supplies, equipment and just

'stuff'. One time 'Granny' Campbell was complaining about not having enough knitting yarn and Seth came back from his next patrol with a wagon full of knitting, crocheting, needlepoint, rug hooking and bolts of cloth and the attendant supplies. We have a real craft shop going. It gives people something to do.

It amazes me how much talent we have in the Settlement. One patrol brought in a load of musical instruments, including a piano. Sven tuned it and Peggy Watson is giving lessons. Several people play banjo, guitar, brass and woodwind. The only lessons that have been banned from the Settlement are those of the bagpipes. They have to be in the hills and I bet they have frightened off every varmint within miles. There are lessons going on all of the time. We have poetry and story writing, plays, musicals and talent shows. Cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, sledding and a variety of winter sports have been organized.

All troopers have been required to become proficient on skis and snowshoes. We have set up patrols in the backcountry and to the Valleys. Skis are the most difficult to supply. We haven't the expertise to manufacture them, yet. Snowshoes are fairly simple to make and each trooper must make his or her own.

We have the ditch and drawbridge ready. I am surprised that the thing actually works. I expected it to fall apart, but Andy and Mike have done wonders. We have camouflaged the machine guns above the palisade, on the hillside. The Defense Committee has a plan in place to hit their supply lines with two troops. That should assure that they can't lay siege to us and they must attack or retreat. What really bothers me is whether they have artillery.

It seems like there is an epidemic of weddings, lately. Sarah seems to

think that it is because they may not survive the spring and want someone to share the winter with. Don't know, but there have been a lot of them.

News from the valleys is scarce. We had a period of calm around Christmas and Harry, Hans and Jim snowshoed into CaveValley. They were doing well. The Cabin is very comfortable and, according to Stretch, there has been a minimum of friction. The kids are being schooled there and the boys are keeping an eye on the herd. Two late calves were found frozen, but they were added to the meat supply, so they didn't go to waste. They swung through BlackValley on the way back. Gina miscarried and was very depressed about it, but is perking up, now that she is pregnant again. Ruth is worried, saying it is too soon, but Doc White says that it might not matter. He has had several couples that had children 10 and 11 months apart.

Zach answered the knock on the door to find a rumpled and harried looking William Smith standing on his doorstep. He invited the governor in and offered him tea, since they were out of coffee in the Settlement. William refused and asked to talk with Sarah. She had been lying down, suffering from morning sickness, but came out to greet their guest.

“What is it, William?” she asked as she sat in the most comfortable chair and Zach arranged a blanket around her knees and threw another log on the already blazing fire. She gave William a smile to encourage him.

William thought again how beautiful she was and how she had changed from the first time they had met, after the first Rawlins expedition. He shook himself out of his reverie and replied, “It's my wife, Sandy, and not just her, but a few of the other women, a bunch of cackling hens, if you ask

me. They think that just because I am governor, I can fix everything with just a snap of my fingers. Lordy, I have enough to do, what with being governor and taking care of the supplies, without getting pestered with something I can't do anything about. I ask you, is it fair? No! It's not. Not fair at all." Zach, who had to shout to get his attention, brought his tirade to a halt.

"William. WILLIAM." Zach cried. When William stopped and gaped at his friend, Zach continued, "What ARE you talking about? What is this problem? What are they pestering you about?"

Sarah laughed at the look on William's face. "Why, Harry, Hans and Jimmy, of course. What do you think I have been trying to tell you? The women are upset and I am taking the heat for it." William looked indignant.

Zach chuckled and said, "No, you didn't tell us what the problem was..."

"I didn't?" William interrupted. "Well, it seems that those three have cut quite a swath through the unmarried women. The hotel has almost become a – a – private brothel, as Sandy says. Did you know that Ella Lantz, Coralee Morris and Janet Smith are pregnant? Sandy does. I hear about it constantly. She wants something to be done. What can I do?"

Sarah interrupted him with, "What do Ella, Coralee and Janet say? Are they demanding to get married?"

"Well, I haven't talked with them. I was hoping you would, Sarah. I mean, Coralee and Janet are from Rawlins, like you, and I, well, I thought, you know..." he trailed off on his comments and looked at Sarah hopefully.

Zach wanted to know if William had spoken with the three culprits and William admitted that he hadn't and he hoped that Zach, who knew them better, would side with him. The mayor complained that he was going to

sound like a Baptist preacher, going all moral on them.

Zach and William waited for Sarah to bathe and dress and discussed the situation. Both agreed that it was none of their business, as long as the participants didn't have a problem, but they understood the concerns of Sandy and the other married women. What was to stop their husbands from following along and what kind of example did it set for the younger people?

They set out together, Sarah separating from them to head for the weaving shed, where the women worked. Zach and William continued on to the hotel to look at the assignment log. Hans and Jimmy had come in the previous day from taking out patrols and were sitting in the lobby of the hotel going over the map they had been compiling. They looked up when William cleared his throat and asked, "Got a minute, gentlemen?"

"Sure, we're finished here. Just wanted to update the portions we went through on the last patrol. Looks like there's a wall to the south. It would be real hard to climb that," Hans said. "I'll take Four Troop out on Wednesday to do a more complete scout. We will stop by BlackValley for the first night. What's up?"

"We seem to have a problem," Zach began, when it was obvious that William wasn't going to start the conversation.

"Oh?" commented Jimmy.

"Yeah, Sandy and some of the ladies are upset at your philandering."

"Philandering?" Hans asked with a grin growing on his face.

"Come on, you know what I mean. Your wild oats have taken root in, at least, three fields, so to speak," Zach said. "Sandy and some of the other ladies are worried that there will be trouble from the ladies and that you are setting a bad example to the younger kids and unmarried in the troops."

“Now wait a second. First, this is none of your business or the business of these hens. No offense, Will,” Jimmy said, directing his last comment to William.

“None taken.”

We know about Ella’s, Coralee’s and Janet’s condition. Hell, we even offered to marry them! They said they wanted someone more stable, if you can believe that. They were happy about being knocked up, but they didn’t necessarily want a husband. Made us feel kind of used, as it were,” Hans sounded offended and the rest laughed at his expression.

“When I talked with Janet, she said that there were plenty of father figures around,” Jimmy interjected. “She said that she had noticed that the kids were being taken care of by everybody. From spanking to praise, it was like the old saying of ‘It takes a village to raise a child’.

“Anyway, have you seen the numbers on the sex ratio? There are six single men, if you count the sky pilot, and eighteen adult women. The youngsters have it even worse, there are seventy-three boys in the troop, aged fifteen and up. There are only forty-five girls in the same age range. No wonder there is a little slap and tickle going on outside the bonds of marriage.”

“Look,” Hans said. “Unless we balance the population out, this will go on. Biological urges, you know. And not just ours,” he finished, waving his forefinger at William. “Hell, William, why don’t you do your part and take another wife? That way, Sandy can’t get upset if you double-dip. Or, wouldn’t she like that?”

William looked panicked at the thought of approaching Sandy with the suggestion that he takes another wife. Zach saved him from having to

answer that question by agreeing with their assessment of the situation. “If the ladies don’t have a problem being pregnant with no husbands around, then, I agree, it is none of our business. However, if ever one of your ladies wants to make the child legitimate, then I expect that you will do the ‘right thing’.”

“How can you doubt us?” Jimmy asked.

“Because, there are a lot of women that would marry either one of you in a minute. If you were serious about getting married, we would have had the ceremony long before now,” Zach replied. “Sarah is over talking to the ladies and she should join us before long. Until then, let me see where this wall is.”

They spent the next hour going over the map, setting out patrol routes to make the most of the troops and setting the schedule to allow the patrols to base out of one of the valleys for a week or so. Jimmy agreed to take out Two Troop and see what it would take to set up a temporary camp in BeaverValley.

Sarah walked in, a smile wreathing her face, when she saw the men. They all stood as she approached and greeted her with congratulations on her condition and laughed at the fussing Zach did to get her settled in an overstuffed armchair he moved up.

She smiled fondly at Zach and waited until he had seated himself on the arm of her chair before she spoke, “I talked with Janet and Ella. They said they don’t want to marry Hans, Harry or Jimmy. They wanted the babies, but not the husbands. At least, as Ella put it, not someone who wanders all over the countryside. They would like husbands, but someone a little more stable, is on their agenda.” She laughed at the look on Hans’ and Jimmy’s faces.

“They said that Coralee agreed with them.”

She looked solemn when the men went over the male/female ratios with her. Sarah admitted that there was a problem, but, without an influx of older men and younger women, there wasn't much that could be done. She washed her hands of the whole situation, saying that she was not ready for another wife in her family and had no right to judge anyone else. William looked uncomfortable as she reiterated Hans' statement about Sandy having no right to say anything, either, unless she was ready to accept another woman in her household.

Sarah rose and asked Zach to take her home, as she was feeling tired. Zach jumped to his feet, all apologies and comfort. He bundled her into her coat and solicitously walked her out the door.

After they left, William said that he thought he would head for the Emporium and try and think of something to say that wouldn't get him banished to the couch. Jimmy and Hans laughed and left to find Harry and let him know what was going on.

The winter continued with successive snowstorms, sometimes completely shutting off the Valleys and any troops in the field. Paul Washington had to have two toes of his right foot amputated for frostbite, after which Doc White forbade any more patrols in the backcountry until the temperature rose.

The supply of wood and coal dropped to worrisome levels. The Santini's were only able to dig the coal when the weather permitted and all the dry wood had been collected. They were burning some of the green firewood, which was supposed to be ready for the following year. An emergency plan to dismantle several of the unused homes was formulated, but the weather

eased after January and temperatures rose.

There were several new additions to the Settlement. Hope Edwards, Zach Campbell, Gail Ngunye and Rawlins Niles were born over the winter and all were doing fine.

Doc White was experimenting with local plants for their medicinal properties. He had several volumes of botany books and several more of home remedies. So far, he had been able to identify most of the plants the patrols brought back and several had medicinal properties. He called himself a Witch Doctor when he dispensed herbal remedies and a Medical Doctor when he diagnosed and delivered babies.

Hobbies became a big part of the life of the Settlement. Chess sets, checker sets, nativity scenes, toys and much more were being carved out of scraps of wood; sweaters, scarves, gloves, socks, and other knitted goods were being turned out, with the likes of Granny Campbell teaching those who wanted to learn; paintings and drawing classes were being conducted. Digby had started a book club, which met to read and discuss the stories and poetry. Grace O'Malley formed a Thespian Club, which put on plays and musicals. Several 'bands' have been formed, from classical to modern. Concerts and dances were frequent, with a potluck the order of the day. Seven Troop found a farmhouse with a large collection of war games in the attic and soon there were houses given over to massive games of Waterloo, Axis and Empires, Dungeons and Dragons, Avalon Hill games, SPI games, Peace Games, Legend games and the offerings of many more companies. There were plenty of the classics, too, Monopoly, Clue, Parcheesi, Backgammon, Cards, Dominos, Chutes and Ladders, Candy Land, and many more. Puzzle tables were set up in virtually every household. Armies of toy soldiers, buckets of

marbles and train sets were collected, though the train sets weren't much use because of the lack of electricity due to the cloud cover.

There had been a concerted effort to make alternative sources of energy viable in the teens and twenties. The town would like to be able to build a grid big enough to supply electricity to the whole town for the whole day. Sally Spires and Sandy Smith, the electricians, were working with Marvin York to hook up the existing solar panels into a network with the wind turbines they had set up. They are also trying to collect enough of the industrial batteries to be able to form a reserve of power when the wind and sun don't supply enough. So far, they have enough power for about two hours a day, if the sun was shining or the wind blowing. In the hopes of a breakthrough, the patrols collected tapes, dvds, mini-disc, cds, media sticks and the machines to play them.

Snowball fights were common and often included the whole town. When two hundred and fifty people get into a melee, there were hours of fun, though there were cuts and bruises after every game.

On the third week of March, the weather changed, with the wind coming out of the south. The snow began to melt and the old dread of an attack by the Mahdists flowered again.

The first Monday in April saw Zach, Matt, Ed Johnson and Harry McGregor waiting at the top of the cliff near the Leaning Pine. They had excavated holes at the foot of the cliff, where tracks had been found the previous year. The pits were camouflaged and situated where no horses would trample the hidden troopers. Two full troops were situated to support their hidden comrades, should the need arise. Ed had been disgusted at the lack of care the Mahdists had taken when approaching the rendezvous. He

commented that they should have sent scouts and approached the place from different directions.

The messages were exchanged and the code seemed to work. The message sent down was:

“Most of the Settlement is in far valleys to ready for planting. Lightly defended. The grace of Allah is never ending.”

The return message read:

“Forces gathering. Ready in two weeks. Dawn attack. Demonstration at back entrance. Allah is Generous with his Rewards.”

The hidden watchers didn't hear anything, which would indicate that the messengers were suspicious. Plans were carried out to evacuate the women and children to Cave and BlackValleys. The road was finished to BlackValley and food, supplies and clothing were stored. Shelters were hastily constructed. The herds were brought up and the defenses were prepared. This would be the last stand, if the Mahdists managed to break through the Settlement. The orders were to scatter, if these defenses fell, and meet where the cattle was collected. After that, they were to head for the MormonLands or northwest to Washington, Oregon or Idaho.

One and Four Troops were assigned as strike forces to harass the Mahdists supply train and rear. Three and B Troops, along with Militia C, would be responsible for the defense of CaveValley. Eight and C Troops, along with Militia D, would be responsible for BlackValley. Two and A

Troops would be responsible for the Back Door. When the pressure was relieved there, Two Troop would support the strike force or the Settlement forces, whichever seemed to be in the most need. D and E Troops would be responsible for the defense from the lower valley to the Settlement. Militia A and B were stationed on the cliff above the gate, while Five Troop was stationed at the Ranch, Six and Seven Troops were behind the hastily built wall of rock loaded wagons and in fox holes behind the ditch. With them were the majority of RPGs and the two mortars. The mortar operators were linked by hardline to Edwin Johnson, on the cliff, who would be their fire control. There was still too much atmospheric interference to use wireless communication.

And now, they waited.

Chapter 23

The Mahdists – Day One

Spring 2042

We have done all we can. The battle will soon be joined. We have sent out the Scouts. There are eighty men at the main gate and twenty-four in the strike force. We are responsible for the other two hundred or so. I would say civilians, but I don't think there are any civilians, now. We know the Mahdists will slaughter every one of us. We have proven that we will not stay loyal; they will know that we would do it again. We have hurt them, killing and subverting their soldiers. There will be no mercy, except, maybe, the younger children.

The women and children are as safe as we can make them and the herds are, too. We just have to hold them. I am sitting halfway down the cliff with the sniper rifle. I am, really, a sitting duck. When they figure where I am firing from, they will have at me. I can't escape; they lowered me to my position with a rope and that is the only way up or down. Sarah would have a fit, if she knew. Hopefully, I can pick off the commanders and interrupt their command structure. At least, I have a comfortable bed. I have bags filled with hay to help stop ricochets.

We'll see.

The scout rode in with the news. He shouted up to Edwin Johnson, "There are five hundred infantry, about two hundred cavalry, fifteen trucks

with troops and hauling four cannon, two tanks and a train of forty or fifty wagons and trucks. The cavalry, troop trucks are pushing ahead, led by the tanks. Good luck.” With that he spurred away towards the Strike Force and the rest of the forces waited.

Towards noon, they saw movement around the knolls. Zach used his field glasses to see what the activity was all about. He saw the field guns being muscled up the hill and emplaced on the top. The troop trucks, cavalry and tanks skirted the base of the hill and advanced on the Throat. The Mahdist formation was closely packed and, when Edwin ordered the mortars to fire, one truck and a group of horsemen were destroyed.

With the first shot, the tanks rumbled ahead at full speed, firing their cannon as they came. The palisade was a shattered mess by the time the tanks reached the barrier. The cavalry and trucks full of infantry followed them closely. The tanks smashed through the smoking ruin of the palisade and fell into the ditch. Cavalry piled up behind them and were cut down by fire from behind the wagon barricade. The momentum of the trucks forced the cavalry forward and the few who were able to jump the ditch were cut down.

An RPG squad delivered death and destruction into the ranks of the remaining trucks adding to the confusion. The cavalry streamed away while the few surviving trucks spewed their infantry and tried to reverse out of the passage. The infantry was shot down as they tried to advance over the ditch. The crew of the left tank was cut down as they scrambled out of the vehicle.

Zach spotted a command car halted halfway between the Mound the entrance. He carefully ranged his shot and fired, driving a slug into the engine. Immediately, there was smoke and steam billowing from the machine. “Hadn’t planned on that,” he muttered as he took aim at a green-

turbaned figure speaking into a handset. The turban blossomed as the next shot took the man in the head, flinging him over the trunk of the open-topped car. Three other men burst from the car and began to sprint back to the hill where the artillery was positioned. Zach managed to hit one of them and then turned his attention to the confusion of men and machines below him.

He saw a bareheaded officer waving his pistol and urging the cavalry and infantry to attack. Zach blew a hole in his chest and he flew off his horse from the force of the shot. Zach shifted his position, slightly, and fired at another officer trying to rally the men. Shot after shot, he picked off the officers and non-coms that showed any sign of trying to rally the confused troops. Finally, they had had enough. With the tanks gone, ten trucks burning, the cavalry galloping away and their officers dead, the infantry began to run headlong for the hill, throwing away equipment to enable them to run faster.

Several of the infantrymen threw down their weapons and surrendered. While elements of Five Troop rounded up the prisoners and checked for wounded, Edwin called down coordinates to the mortar crews. Zach looked at the Mound where he feared an artillery barrage was about to start. He saw a scramble of men from around the guns and horsemen in the artillery position. Matt had attacked the hill under cover of the assault on the palisade. His troopers had cleared the hill and they were trying to haul the guns away when the retreating cavalry spotted them.

The troopers scrambled for their horses and several small explosions were seen and heard around the guns. A few seconds after the troopers fled to the north, a tremendous explosion erupted on the hill. They found out later that a satchel charge had been used to detonate the limbers, which held the

artillery shells.

Zach lowered himself to the foot of the cliff and met up with Ed, who was surveying the carnage.

“Well, that was a mess,” commented Ed. “I don’t know how these guys were able to beat anybody. They broke about every rule you could think of. Very few men could do that and win; Napoleon, Hannibal, Caesar and Patton come to mind. Every one of them should have been slaughtered in their first engagement, but they had the nerve and luck to pull it off. Not these guys.

“Sending in their forces piece-meal. Tanks unsupported by infantry, cavalry unsupported by artillery, infantry on trucks, for God sake.”

He turned to Ellis Villiers and asked for a casualty report. He was told that they had lost five killed and fourteen wounded, none seriously, but that one of the machine guns was inoperable and was being looked at. Ed took the list and showed it to Zach, who read the top five names, Bennet Smith, Paul Tesh, Kyle Edwards, William Smith and Todd Sinclair.

“Damn,” he said. “What is their butcher’s bill?”

“They lost two tanks and crews, ten trucks, forty-two cavalry and sixty-two infantry, killed and captured. There are eighteen prisoners, sir,” Ellis ticked off on his fingers. “In addition, we captured the tanks, if we can make them serviceable, quantities of arms and ammunition and fourteen horses; we had to put eleven down. We don’t know how many were killed out on the plain, but we calculate ten to twelve cavalry and twenty-five to forty infantry, given that there were about twenty infantry to a truck.”

“It looks like they lost their artillery, too. At least, a lot of ammunition,” Zach added. He pointed to the cloud of smoke over the Mound

and explained what he had seen at the end of the battle. Ed simply nodded his approval and ordered the bodies of the enemy to be stacked at the mouth of The Throat. He said it would be a blow to their morale to see the dead.

When they approached the tanks, they heard a tapping coming from the turret of the right-most vehicle. Zach called in Peacock's squad from Five Troop to cover the vehicle. He then called out for the crew to come out with their hands up. The hatch opened slowly and a pair of hands poked out, the shoulders of the crewman forcing the hatch to open as he rose. There was a bloody cut from his hairline to his left ear and his nose had been broken and was bleeding. Zach waved him out and pulled open the hatch so it fell with a clang on the turret. He held it there with his foot and pointed his pistol into the black opening. One after the other, the remaining eight men climbed out of the vehicle, every one of them hurt, from cuts and scrapes to a concussion and broken bones.

Zach looked at Ed and asked, "That all of the crew?"

When Ed indicated that there should be a crew of ten in a Mark XI battle tank, Zach pointed his pistol at the head of the man who had exited first.

"Whoa, man," he said. "Owens got a broken neck when we high-dived into that ditch. He's still down there."

Henryk Patcheski gave his weapon to a comrade and dropped down the ladder. He poked his head up a few moments later and reported that there was a dead crewman. Zach ordered him to get him out of there and find Andy Scales or Mike Stewart.

The small group of prisoners was given water and Doc White looked at the unconscious man and shook his head. "Bad head wound. Skull is spongy. I wouldn't even move him, if I were you." He looked at the man's

crewmates and said, "Sorry, there isn't anything I can do." He hurried off to see to the other wounded.

Zach and Ed conferred and agreed that there was little chance of any more attacks that day. The Mahdists had lost a lot of men and materiel and would wait for their infantry to come up. Ed ordered Ellis to stay at the ditch and when Andy or Mike showed up, ask them if they could get the tanks out and get them running or, at least, positioned defensively. Then he ordered John Peacock to escort all of the prisoners to The Ranch.

At the ranch house, Ed ordered the prisoners be kept in the empty alpaca birthing pens and have them sent in one at a time for interviews. When they returned, those that had already been questioned were to be kept separate from the others. The prisoners were to be given food and water, but they were to be shot, if they tried to escape. When one of the tank crewmen asked about use of a bathroom, Ed ordered a latrine dug, but to make sure that the tools used removed.

Ed joined Zach in the ranch house, where he was seated behind the table. A chair and a glass of water were positioned across from them and the first prisoner was brought in. He was a defiant looking man with a bandage around his head. He carried a green turban and refused to sit. He gave his name and started on a lecture about the woes, which were to be visited on their unbelieving heads. Zach had him removed.

The next man was the leader of the tank crew. His wounds were bandaged and he casually sat down and said, "My name is Paul Rogers, of the Fifth Cavalry Regiment. Those tanks are all that are left of the old Fifth. The men in my crew are all Fifth men. We were in Fort Benning when this mess started. As you may know, a lot of the men went home, after the Pentagon

was destroyed and our command structure broke down. Our commander managed to keep a few of us together, those who didn't really have anyplace to go.

“We formed a sort of militia group, helping the local government with keeping the peace after the panic set in and the epidemic got going. We lost a lot of men to the plague.

“When we had been reduced to six vehicles and seventy-two men, we kind of formed our own little country, you might say. Most of us were from the Chicago/Detroit area and we headed in that direction. We planned on finding a place and trying to set up a base, kind of like what you have here. Someplace to start again. Anyway, by the time we got to Chicago, we were down to four tanks and a truck with spare parts, five crews and ten support personnel.

“The Mahdists were attacking the civilian enclaves around the Joliet area and we went in to try and stop them. We gathered up a couple of hundred men who had formed a militia and popped in on them. We did all right for a while, but last fall, these Mahdists came in with all guns blazing. They came in to kill. And, man, kill they did. They didn't leave one local man, woman or child alive.”

“You're still alive,” commented Zach, quietly.

“We are alive only because the bastards wanted our tanks and they didn't know how to run them. They offered to spare our lives, if we converted and joined them. At the time we were surrounded by a thousand of them and it seemed the better part of valor. So, we converted and joined them. We had three tanks and a truck of parts and two crews and ten support personnel. We were split into two groups, only one of which was every allowed out at the

same time. We trained some of the Mahdists on operations and repair of the tank. The Mahdists managed to find extra shells, fuel and parts for us.

“A month ago, we were told that we were going on a Jihad to the west, to kill a group of unbelievers. Christ, to these guys, everyone’s a Kaafir. We started out a week ago and this morning, we were told that we would be going into glorious battle for Allah and the Caliphate. We said our prayers, ate breakfast and mounted up. But, we, all of the old Fifth, mounted into tank 115. We told the colonel that we fought better as a team and we would be honored to lead the charge and die for Allah.

“If you hadn’t had the damn ditch there, we were going to put a shell in the other tank, if we couldn’t figure a way to get those crazy fanatics out of it and take it along. Then we were going to head across this first valley, through the settlement and out the back door. We figured that the fifty men they had making a demonstration there wouldn’t be too hard to brush out of the way. After that, we were on our own again and we would try and figure out how to get our buddies out of New Mecca.”

Ed and Zach asked him questions for another hour, but couldn’t shake his statement. They questioned the other members of the crew and got the same story. While they were finishing with the last crewman, Andy entered and reported that the two tanks could be salvaged, but one had a broken tread and the turret of the other had been sprung. He had both of them out of the ditch and on the valley side, but they were way too heavy to move far with horses.

Zach had a guard bring in Paul Rogers. When he arrived, Zach had Andy give his report again to Rogers. Paul wanted to look at the tanks with one of his men who was their emergency mechanic, saying that the broken

tread wasn't much of a problem, but the sprung turret could be serious. Ed nodded and gave the order to John Peacock, telling to make sure the tanks had been gone over thoroughly for weapons and hidden compartments.

Of the seventeen remaining prisoners, every cavalryman refused to speak, not surprising in that these were the elite of the Mahdist army. The eleven infantrymen ranged in age from seventeen to thirty-eight and most were eager to leave the Mahdist army. Two, who were non-commissioned officers, refused to speak and were sent to join the cavalrymen in the Settlement jail. The remaining nine were interviewed again and sent to the jail to be incarcerated in the drunk-tank, where they all could be housed together and away from the recalcitrant prisoners.

Ed called a meeting of the Defense Committee, those that were around, to decide what to do. Andy reported back that the tank with operating treads had towed the other to a position where it could cover the entrance. The tread had been salvaged and been brought to the ranch. The other tank had functioning machine guns and been positioned to support the remaining machine guns.

Harry McGregor had sent one of his men to the Back Door to see what had happened there and reported that the attack had been beaten off with one casualty and six prisoners. The prisoners, apparently, had deserted. They had inflicted minor casualties on the attackers, who didn't press the attack, after the green-turbans in charge had been killed. Two Troop had chased the survivors to the plains and never returned.

Harry wanted to send out Five Troop and see if they could find the missing troop and learn what had happened to the Strike Force, but the rest overruled him. He saw that sending out a troop into the dark among hostile

enemy forces would be foolish. At that moment, a shot rang out from the direction of the mouth of the pass and the committee members sprang to their feet, grabbed their weapons and ran out the door. Before they could mount up, a drumbeat of hooves sounded louder and Tim Scales dismounted before his horse came to a full stop. He was grinning and said, “Almost got myself shot out there.”

“Trooper Scales reporting, sirs. Matt said to have my say fast, get my orders and haul ass back. So, we busted up them guns. It was a turkey shoot. They was looking towards the pass and we snuck up behind them and knocked them over like bowling pins. We captured the guns and tried to haul them off, but we couldn’t, so we dumped a grenade down each barrel and dump a couple of satchel charges in the ammo trucks.

“Then we circled east and swung around their infantry. We hit their supply train and run off a bunch of wagons. The guards were all kids, newbies, like. They mostly ran, except for ten or eleven of them, who joined us. We shot up the trucks, like Major Johnson told us, putting a couple of slugs in the engine compartments. Then we threw satchel charges in the trucks and hauled the wagons off with us. We knocked out about twenty trucks and got eight wagons of supplies. After that we headed straight north, running into the big gully up there. We looked at the stuff in the wagons and found ammunition, arms, grenades, tents, food, water, gasoline and spare parts for some honkin’ big vehicle.

“We took what stuff we needed and cached the rest and headed back here. On the way, we caught up with two guys who said they were from the Fifth. When we met up with Two Troop, Matt turned over the prisoners to them and they are bringing them in through the Back Door.

“Oh, yeah, here is a list of who we lost.”

Zach was amazed at the speed with which Scales talked, and without seeming to take a breath. They thanked him and ordered a fresh horse be saddled for him and ordered him to return to the Strike Force. He was to tell Matt that they calculated that the Mahdists had lost between one hundred forty and one hundred and eighty men, killed and captured; both tanks, their guns and whatever supplies the Strike Force had destroyed. The Strike Force was to continue harassing the Mahdists as long as they could do it with minimal casualties and send in regular reports. One squad was to patrol the road east and make every effort to stop any messages getting through. With a wild screech of enthusiasm, Tim galloped towards the upper valley.

Two Troop rode up at that point. Jason Costler reported, “We killed five of the Mahdists and took six prisoners at the Back Door. Then we chased the Mahdists out onto the plain and killed another one, capturing three more. Most of the attackers had thrown away their guns in the panic to escape and, eventually, surrendered to us, after we chased them some more. We took thirty more prisoners. We were about to start back, after caring for some of the enemy wounded, when the Strike Force arrived with its prisoners. Matt suggested that Two Troop take charge of all of the prisoners and deliver them to the jail. He told me that he would send Tim Scales through the pass to let you know what was going on. We took the prisoners to the jail and turned them over to D Troop and came down here to see what you wanted us to do.”

Ed ordered him to take his troop into the Settlement and join D Troop at the jail. They were to guard the prisoners and get some rest.

“Looks like they have lost about twenty-five percent of their forces and their heavy equipment and a lot of their supplies,” Ed told the committee

when they had returned to The Ranch house. “I expect to see an infantry attack tomorrow. It will be suicide, but these idiots don’t care how many troops they lose, as long as they kill us. Hell, some of the troops don’t care either, it gets them to paradise.

“Get the men a hot meal and let them get some rest, watching turn and turn about. If we can stop them tomorrow with the kind of casualties we inflicted today, they shouldn’t be able to sustain this campaign.

“I suggest we all get some rest. It will be a long day tomorrow. Zach, I would like you back in your sniper’s nest tomorrow, early. We need you to pick off the officers, again. You probably saved us from an artillery barrage by killing the officer in the command car and disrupting their communications, giving Matt time to mount his assault.

“Andy, can you do something about getting the tanks operational for tomorrow? I would like to be able to use them when the Mahdists attack, kind of our own artillery.”

“Ed, we are low on fuel, but we have transferred all we had from the tank with the sprung turret to the other one. Without fuel, we can’t power the electronics necessary for the targeting and firing systems. We will have to use the manual system, which will mean slow cycling time and ranging shots. There are a total of twenty rounds of HEAP, that’s High Explosive Armor Piercing; eight rounds of HE; seven rounds of AP. We do have twenty rounds of smoke, for what that’s worth. There are eight and a half boxes of ammunition for the machine guns. Interestingly enough, they are .50, which has been illegal for decades, under the U.N. Oh, there is a copy of the Koran, with the tank’s designation neatly printed on the cover.”

“Thanks, Andy. Harry,” he said, turning to McGregor, “I need your

best rider. I want him to contact Matt and determine the type of fuel he captured. If it is for the tanks, get it back here as soon as he can. Oh, Harry, make sure that he is careful at the Back Door; they might try and hit us there again.

”Gentlemen, meeting adjourned. Get some rest; we’re going to need it.”

Zach nodded and felt a knot of worry build in his stomach. He wondered if he was feeling his luck running out.

Chapter 24

The Mahdists – Day Two

Spring 2042

Luck was with us, today. We managed to nail the Mahdists and suffered few casualties ourselves. Even one loss is a tragedy for the community. Kyle Edwards, Todd Sinclair and William Smith all left families and they will be missed. I expect the Mahdists to better prepare their attack today. We don't have the benefit of misinformation that caused them to attack piecemeal. We figure that there are more than seven hundred troops left to them. The cavalry won't be a problem, with the ditch to stop them. Most of their infantry is conscripts and, judging from the events at the Back Door, they have little stomach for a fight.

It appears that their artillery is inoperable, though they may have a few nasty surprises in store for us when they bring what's left of their supply train. In yesterday's confusion, they didn't spot me, but today, I won't have the element of surprise and they will be looking for my sniper position, especially, if I start killing officers at the rear of the attack.

I am of two minds about the tankers. They asked to join us, again, this morning. Harry and I spoke against it. If they were still sympathetic to the Mahdists, their control of the tank would be fatal. Andy and Mike have assured us that we have the ability to fire the tank, though it will be slower than an experienced gunner could do it. I really want to trust them. They would be a huge asset, if...

Two Troop has been ordered to move down to the Ranch house. Five Troop has been moved to the wagons. Six Troop's first squad, under Andy is in charge of the tank; its second squad is with the wagons, ready to reinforce first squad. E Troop delivered ten cans of fuel for the tanks. Matt had a squad run them in. He reported light resistance from a small cavalry force that broke and ran at his charge. He informed Amanda Voorhees that Yancey Miles, of Four Troop, was patrolling the east road.

Looking out over the plain, I can see dust around the hill. The sun is just coming up. It appears that the cavalry units are heading towards the Back Door. I signaled Ed on the far side of the pass and he indicated that he saw the cavalry. I am assuming that he sent a message to warn them. I hate to think of the girls being in the middle of this. My little Amazons.

Well, here they come. I can see the lines of infantry. Two trucks to the left have machine guns mounted on the roof. My first target.

This assault was better organized. There were two trucks moving slightly behind the first line of infantry. They began to lay down suppression fire at a hundred yards out. Ed ordered the mortars to fire at the right and left side of the infantry formation, to try and knock them out. Zach took aim at the hood of the rightmost truck and put a shot through the engine. The truck came to a sudden halt. Zach's next shot took out the gunner on the first truck, but the gunner on the second truck spotted him and traversed his machine gun to rake the cliff side.

Zach coolly aimed and fired, his shot smashing into the weapon and spinning it violently around, knocking the gunner over the side of the truck.

Without realizing the gunner was gone, the truck kept pace with the infantry. The replacement gunner on the first truck had seen where the other gunner had been firing and he poured a fierce barrage at Zach.

Stinging rock chips struck Zach as he ducked behind the meager cover he had managed to pile in front of his firing position. When the stream of bullets let up, Zach risked a glance at his assailant and saw him reloading another belt of ammunition. He hastily brought up his rifle and snapped a shot, which missed. It was a race to see who could take out the other first. Zach took a deep breath, let out half and gently squeezed the trigger, his sights covering the man's chest. As he applied the extra ounce of pressure necessary to fire, the gunner had cocked his weapon and was swinging it around. Before he could fire, Zach's shot took him in the chest and blew him off the truck.

Zach wiped off the sweat trickling down his cheek, only to find a red smear on the heel of his hand. He touched the spot with his fingers and found that he had a small gash where a rock chip had cut him. Wiping his fingers of his hand on his pants, he swung his scope across the field, looking for a target.

As Zach was dueling with the machine gunners, the infantry formation closed on the pass. Ed noticed that a line of cavalry was walking behind the infantry and suspected a sudden charge through openings in the infantry formation, when he saw one of the cavalymen lash out at a lagging infantryman. Then he understood that the cavalry was there to keep the infantry from retreating. He changed the range of the mortars to drop shells at the back of the infantry formation, trying to scatter the cavalry and give the infantry the opportunity to run.

His militia units were safe, for the moment. The infantry was shooting down the length of the pass, intent on breaking through and

overrunning the defenders. Once that was done, his men were trapped on the cliff and could be pried out at the Mahdist's leisure.

As the infantry pushed into the pass, the tank opened up. The first shell was smoke. This was followed by high explosive. The smoke prevented the infantry from seeing and they fired blindly down the pass, most of the bullets passing over the heads of the entrenched defenders. The carnage was frightful in the close confines of the pass. Shell fragments ricocheted off the walls, tearing into the infantry formations decimated by the initial explosion.

The defenders were also firing blindly through the smoke, but they knew where the enemy was and had a limited target range. By the time the smoke began to clear, Five, Six and Seven Troops had done sickening slaughter. The enemy had failed to penetrate to the Ditch and lay in windrows, sprawled out in the hideous positions of death.

The infantry, encouraged by the easing of pressure by the disrupted cavalry and the horror of walking into the butcher's den, had turned and pushed their way out, shooting any officer or cavalryman who tried to force them back.

Ed signaled his men to cease firing. He had not seen this kind of carnage since he had served as an advisor on the border where they had turned back the invasion of starving people at Brownsville, TX. There the horde had trampled over the dead and dying, turning the Rio Grande red, until there were simply no more.

The smoke cleared in front of the early morning breeze, displaying the casualties they had inflicted. The plain before the pass was littered with a scattering of bodies. Several crawled towards their comrades milling at the base of the Mound.

Officers were pushing the remnants of the infantry into line and more than one shot rang out, followed by a body dropping to the ground. Finally, some semblance of order was restored and the advance began again. Ed waited until the rear had advanced into the range of his mortars and he dropped the last of his ammunition among the cavalry. Zach kept up a steady fire, targeting green turbans and cavalrymen. He had also seen that the infantry was being driven on.

After the third line had entered the pass, Zach heard the tank begin to lob shells into the advancing infantry. Soon after the first explosion, the infantry began backing up and, finally, turned and ran for the Mound. He saw a knot of infantry shoot down three cavalrymen barring their way. This was like a signal to the rest of the hard-pressed infantry and the remaining cavalry and officers went down like wheat before the mower. One of the infantrymen pulled a light colored piece of cloth from his pocket and waved it over his head, dropping he rifle as he did so. Others soon followed his lead and the survivors of the attacking force dropped their weapons.

Onto this scene, Matt Busby's Strike Force charged, trapping the Mahdists between the defenders in the pass and themselves. Matt had sliced through the confusion at the base camp and scattered the troops guarding the supplies. He had assigned Four Troop's remaining squad to hold the camp and rode on with One Troop.

The remains of the Mahdist infantry stood sullenly while they were stripped of weapons and ammunition and herded two hundred yards away from the pass. Zach, Ed and Harry McGregor rode out to look them over. Harry made the obvious comment that there was no way they could house and feed this many prisoners.

Ed, hiding the pain from the ride, halted his mount near the beaten group. He folded his hands over the pommel of his saddle and called, "Anyone in charge here? Any non-coms, officers, anybody?"

Most of the soldiers were black, Harry noticed. When he commented on this to Zach, he was told that this was a change from the makeup of the Mahdists troops they had initially fought.

Finally, a small, lean black man, in his mid-twenties stood up and walked to the edge of the guard circle. He had a slight wound in his left arm, around which he had wrapped a bandage made from the tail of a shirt.

"We could use some water, General," he said in an insolent tone.

"We could use some peace," Ed retorted, but he signaled to a trooper, who rode back to the pass to fetch supplies. "You speak for the rest of them?" Ed continued, waving to the Mahdists.

"Maybe. Hey, we ain't done nothing to you. We was forced into this. Just let us go."

"Son," Ed said in his most genial manner, a sign to those who knew him that he had reached the end of his patience. "You may not have noticed, but you attacked us. We didn't issue any invitations to get shot at. Now, if that ain't doing nothing, let me know what is."

"I ain't your son, old man, and we was forced, I mean forced, into this. We had no choice, but now that it is over and we killed the Mahdist bastards, we don't mean to continue. So, just leave us alone and we'll leave you alone."

Ed sat in amazement at the brazen attitude of the man. "Let me get this straight. You're trying to tell me that this fight is between the Mahdists and us and you just happened to be strolling by and got caught in the middle?"

That you didn't march in here with the Mahdists? That the Mahdists didn't arm you? That you didn't shoot at us, under orders of the Mahdists? What were you going to do, if the Mahdists had beaten us? Just continue on your way to the corner store, all five hundred of you?"

"Hey, man, I told you. We didn't want any part of this and we were forced into it."

"Hey, MAN, you could have refused or shot the green-turbans before you shot at us. But you didn't, did you?"

Zach broke in, nudging his horse through the guards and forcing the arrogant, young man back. "Let me tell you, old son, we have every right to hang or shoot each and every one of you. There is no law that we don't make. No Geneva Convention to tell us how we have to treat you. No court to run and snivel to. No lawyers to twist and mangle rules of order and other crap. No one but you and us. We kicked your collective asses and we will decide what to do with you, understand?

"Hell, we could even reinstitute the practice of slavery and you couldn't do much about it. Understand?

"We could do what the Byzantines did to the Bulgarians. We could blind every ninety-nine out of a hundred and poke one eye out of the hundredth, so you would have someone lead you back to where you came from.

"We could do any or all of that, old son, so don't piss me off. You want to talk to us, keep a civil tongue in your head."

At this point, an older man, tall and mocha-coffee colored, with a touch of gray in his hair, stood and approached. He took the younger man by the arm and hissed at him, pushing back into the crowd of soldiers who were

becoming increasingly restless at the direction of the conversation.

“Mister, my name is Jacob Jones. What you say is true. You beat us and beat us badly. You have our lives in your hands, and I apologize for young Nat’s attitude. We are all tired and hungry. We marched three days straight and got shoved into the meat grinder. We saw our friends and neighbors shot down, some by the Mahdists, themselves.

“Most of us are from up near the Twin Cities. Last year the Mahdists came in and took over. Those who didn’t ‘convert’ willingly were shot, burned or butchered like cattle. Those you see here saw the wisdom of living, to be free later. True, we joined the Mahdists. We came here because to refuse was to be killed and have our families killed, as an example. It was either fight or die, just like a lot of wars.”

Zach interrupted him by dismounting. “Equals meet on even ground, Mr. Jones,” he said, holding out his hand. “Most of the people in the valley escaped from the fate you find yourself in. We managed to break out and form a settlement. We will defend our settlement to the death, since there is no place else for us to go.

“Mr. Jones, we are getting water and we will bring up your rations to you. Please, march you men back to the hill, where there is shade. We won’t post guards to keep you. You can leave anytime you or your men wish. We really don’t want you here, not because of your color, but because we can’t support this number of new people. But, if you leave, you leave without arms. Let me tell you this, in friendship, to the north is the Sioux Confederation, to the west is the Mormon Territory, to the southeast are the Fundamentalists, to the south and west is the Aztec Empire. You know what waits you to the east.

“The Mahdists have your families as hostages. They won’t let them go without a fight. It will be up to you to fight them. We don’t have the manpower or the weaponry to do much for you. Anywhere else you go; you will be killed or enslaved. The Sioux will kill you, the Aztec’s will enslave you, the Mormons will not let you enter their lands and settle peacefully. The Fundamentalists are religious bigots and I don’t know if they are racial bigots, too.

So, Mr. Jones, you take your men back to the hill, rest, sleep on it and make your decision. Tomorrow you can bury your dead and we can talk.”

Zach shook his hand again, remounted and rode back through the guards. He motioned Matt to him and said, “Make sure all of the weapons are out of their camp and leave the food and blankets, but bring everything else back here. Weapons, ammunition, gasoline and tools. Leave the shovels, picks and other heavy tools right here. Pull the guards off of them, but make sure that none come back here, without my express permission.”

The militia and troopers had moved in and spread out in a ragged line between the prisoners and the pass. They parted to let the wagon with jerry cans of water pass, and then closed up again like water when a finger is dipped in and removed.

The young man who had spoken first, shoved his way through the guards and grabbed the reins of Zach’s horse, stopping it. “You honky bastard,” he shouted. “You don’t care about anything and you’re going to turn us away, just because we are black. If we were white bread, you would mount up and help, but we’re pumpernickel, so you don’t give a damn if we live or die.”

His tirade was broken when a huge, black hand clamped itself to his

shoulder and spun him away, throwing him into the dust. William Smith bent over him, with his hands supporting himself on his bent knees and said in his usual mild voice, “Boy. I said ‘boy’ since you sure aren’t a man. Boy, let me tell you a little something.” He placed his hand on the man’s chest as he struggled to rise and shoved him sprawling before he continued, “What I want to tell you, boy, is that this man and these people have accepted me and every other person who was different, by religion, race or whatever. More than a few of the troopers who helped kicked your black ass, are black. Some are brown, some are white. Hell, some are even women. So, boy, don’t you come to my house and accuse my friends of being anything, unless you know what that anything is.

“We would be more than happy to help you, if we could. And, any one who wants to help is free to go. We are not the Mahdists. Every man, woman and child is free to do as they will, except to injure the Settlement. Talk nice and we will give you your weapons back. Then you can free yourselves and your family. B.S. us, and you can walk back naked. Your choice.”

When he was finished, he grabbed the man’s shirtfront, lifted him up and off his feet, pivoted and tossed him into the crowd of prisoners.

A smile lit up his face as he turned back to Zach, “I just may make a politician, yet. That speech wasn’t half bad. No sir, not half bad.” Zach slapped him on the shoulder and they pushed through the crowd laughing.

Ed and Harry followed them, with Ellis trailing on their heels, his inevitable lists clutched in his hand. They headed for the Ranch House, where Sarah had tea and a hot meal ready. She had refused to leave Mitchell with the others. Zach finally noticed that tears had streaked her dusty face and he

asked, in alarm, what the matter was.

“Oh, Zach,” she cried, “Tori Amundson and Constance Williams. There’re dead.”

“Crap,” he said and folded her into his arms and held her as she cried. He led her to the bunk and gently lowered her onto the mattress and sat, holding her hand and stroking her hair until she fell asleep a few minutes later. He covered her with a blanket and closed the door quietly before returning to the meeting.

The men murmured their sympathy and returned to Ellis’ report, “We lost, as you just heard, two from A Troop. The cavalry we saw this morning attacked the Back Door. A Troop was able to hold them off, since the trail was not meant for a cavalry charge, but Constance was hit. During the fight, Luther and Steven arrived with Four and Eight Troops and smashed into them, driving them back. Tori stood up to cheer and a wild shot hit her. Other than those, there were no casualties at the Back Door. The fifty or so cavalry was routed, with over thirty killed. The rest rode off north, with Four and Eight Troops chasing them. They haven’t returned.

“Matt and the Strike Force hit the camp, but it was pretty demoralized and the few Mahdists there were more intent on loading up what they could and escaping than standing guard. Several slight wounds and the bagging of the General in charge of the campaign, his baggage, family and twelve guards.

“There were no casualties among the Militia. The Mahdists were intent on directing their fire down the pass, trying to break through.”

Zach fingered the scab on his cheek and hid his grin at this.

Ellis continued, “We took eight fatal casualties and quite a few wounded at the wagons. Wladyslaw Pachinski, John Parker, Boris Buchinski,

Patrick Williams, Eddie Barnes, Gregory Haakon, Simon Millner and Michel Erikson.

We captured over six hundred rifles, two machine guns from the trucks, the other two were destroyed by a mortar hit and a snipers bullet,” Ellis gave Zach a look that seemed to say he did it on purpose and should be more careful, “ammunition, thirty horses, trucks and supplies, though a lot of those last have been given back. As for prisoners, there are the 10 tank crewmen and maintenance personnel; thirteen cavalry; two hundred and sixty-three infantry; thirty-one elite infantry; the commanding general and his staff and family.”

Zach sat hunched over his tightly clasped hands and stared at the tabletop. “We lost more than ten percent of our forces, including several children we tried to make into soldiers. I say shoot all of the prisoners, however I know that you would never do that. Excuse me; I have to look after my wife.” He lurched to his feet and entered the room where Sarah was sleeping and closed the door firmly behind him.

William Smith spoke into the painful silence, “He has always taken these deaths hard, no matter how tough and uncaring he tries to prove he is. He’ll be all right in a few days. He does bring up a good point. What are we going to do with the prisoners?” He chuckled and said, “We can forget making them all slaves, I don’t think Charlie Wright would approve. That leaves two choices, kill them or let them go. What with what we captured, we have the bullets, but I’m not sure that I could stomach the bloodshed. But, do we want to let them go?” He sat back, the chair creaking ominously, and folded his massive hands over his ample stomach.

They were joined by the rest of the Defense Committee, except Zach,

and discussed the situation. After several hours of wrangling, they hammered out a policy for the prisoners. They had broken them down into four categories; the tank crew, the green-turbaned Mahdists, the Chicago contingent and the contingent which had been impressed from other areas.

Andy and Mike had pushed for the tankers being given the chance to join the Settlement. They argued that the value of having the tanks as part of the defenses overrode all other arguments against them. This was an easy point for the committee to accept. There were only ten of them and they had significant military importance.

The miscellaneous contingent had Ed, Harry and Jimmy supporting them and pushing for them to be given the opportunity to join the Settlement. There were thirty of them and they could be easily absorbed into the community, especially if BeaverValley was developed.

The Minnesota/Chicago contingent was much too big to absorb. With the attitude they saw, it was decided that they would prove more valuable being sent back and forming another front against the Mahdists. The committee resolved to give them supplies, arms, ammunition and transport and try to maintain a peaceful relationship with them, but they would be several hundred miles away and not a threat for, at least, a year or more.

The forty or so green-turbans, including the cavalry, officers and elite soldiers were a bigger problem. Hans, Stretch, Ed and Harry were for executing them. Hans went so far as to suggest that their heads be placed on poles and left at the border of the Mahdist lands as a warning. William, Jerry Carter and Seth felt that executing them was a bad precedent to set for the Settlement. Wade Hampton was a case of executing a spy; the others were soldiers, fanatical soldiers, but soldiers, nonetheless and deserved some

consideration as such. No one was of the opinion that they should be freed, since they knew too much about the defenses of the Settlement, but no one wanted to keep them as prisoners for the rest of their lives, either.

Since the hour was getting late, they decided to table the discussion until the next day. They left Zach and Sarah sleeping and stationed guards around the house. They would meet after noon the next day and finish the discussion when they had clearer heads.

Chapter 25

Rough Edges

Spring 2042

Yesterday was a good day and a bad day. We managed to eliminate the immediate threat from the Mahdists. From the interrogations we conducted, it seems that we have destroyed about half their remaining strength. We fought the red caps and the gold caps, two of their four divisions. The two remaining divisions, the green caps and the blue caps, had borne the brunt of the conquest of Chicago and were not up to strength and the replacements were still green recruits. The designations were from the color of the baseball caps they wore. The Mahdists used the colors as division uniforms.

The bad part of the day was the losses we took. Eighteen dead may not seem too many, but that was twelve percent of our population. Surprisingly, there was only a small outcry for revenge against the prisoners. The major concern was the missing Three and Eight Troops. After they had broken up the attack at the Back Door, they had pursued the Mahdist cavalry northward. Nothing has been heard of them since. Fourteen more casualties would prove to be a severe blow to the Settlement. If they haven't reported back by the Committee Meeting, we'll have to send out the Matt's Scouts.

We supervised the burial of the dead and Father Tillford held a Mass for the Dead on the field. The tankers, Minnesota/Chicagoans and the miscellaneous contingent (I hate that designation. They both should be called

the ‘cannon fodder troops’, but what do I know?) joined in the service and seemed appreciative, for the most part. The Mahdists refused to attend and stayed in the jail, along with any of the cannon fodder that wanted. At least, now we know who the hard-core Mahdists are.

Jacob and the one I call ‘the angry young man’, who turned out to be Michael ‘Nat’ Turner, approached after the ceremony, thanked Father Tillford and asked, bluntly, what would happen to them. We hadn’t proposed a meeting after so solemn an occasion, and we had our own dead to bury. We told them that they could send representatives to the Defense Committee meeting at noon in the city hall. They agreed to be there.

I spoke with Matt Busby, Jason Costler, Steve Young and Luther Smith and asked them to speak with the miscellaneous troops and sound them out about their plans. I took it upon myself to speak with Paul Rogers and find out his thoughts on the matter of joining the Settlement. Regardless of their decision, we were keeping the tanks.

The funeral for our eighteen was hard. Their parents, wives and children, brothers and sisters were all our friends and we mourned together and deeply. They were buried together in the cemetery. Later in the day, we saw Christopher and Bill Paine and Jaimie Costler planting small trees around the perimeter of the town square. They were to commemorate the dead, one for each. We all pitched in to help. Gino Peligrino and his apprentices began carving their names on the commemorative stone that day and barely slept until they were finished. His brother came back from CaveValley to help, along with his brother’s son. Memorials don’t make up for their absence, but it was the least we could do to honor those who died to save us.

The Council met at noon following the morning's funerals. Jacob Jones, Michael Turner, Kim Allen and Paul Rogers attended. The meeting started with decision to dispatch of the Scouts to try and find Three and Eight Troops. The first item on the agenda was reading the list of casualties, equipment captured and prisoners by Ellis Villiers. Hans reported that there were around a hundred Mahdists who escaped the camp or the first attack on the wagon train. Several were found dead, others surrendered and the rest kept moving towards the east.

Ed began the meeting by outlining the issues. There were the number of prisoners, the disposition of the equipment and supplies captured. Michael immediately demanded that the supplies be turned over to the Chicago contingent of the prisoners and Jacob grabbed his arm and pulled him back into his seat.

"You are here as an observer, only, Mr. Turner," said Ed. "Let us not have another scene like yesterday or you will be removed from the chamber. Do you understand?"

After a long pause, Ed took the sullen silence as an assent and turned back to the other committee members. Andy Scales and Paul Rogers reported that the tanks were repairable and it would only take a few days to bring them up to full function. After they had made their report, Ed asked Paul what his plans were.

"Well, that seems to me that you have more say in that than I do. We are your prisoners, not the other way around."

"Let me rephrase, then. What do you want to do? We would welcome you and your men and the tanks, of course, as assets to the

Settlement. Do you have anywhere else to go? Chicago? Back south?"

"Man, there is no place else we can go, and I think you know that. The south was just a military base we were assigned to. The defense of Chicago was a mercenary operation. The attack on the Settlement was a forced operation. I spoke with my men and we all agreed that if you would have us, we would be happy to stay

"We would like to mount a rescue of those we left behind, but there aren't enough of us. We just hope that they won't be summarily executed over this fiasco."

The members of the committee nodded their approval and Ed welcomed him and asked him to sit as part of the Defense Committee. He asked one of the troopers to notify the jail that the other nine tank crewmen were to be released immediately and assigned to quarters in the hotel or a vacant building of their choice. Paul nodded his thanks and took a seat at the table.

"Mr. Allen. You're next. There are twenty-two of you who have decided that you do not want to join Mr. Jones in returning to Chicago. What are your plans?" Ed asked.

Kim cleared his throat and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Um, we don't really have any plans. None of us are from around there and most of the boys are worried about our families. We would like to see if we could get them out of there. We know it will be dangerous, and most likely we won't be able to rescue everybody, but we feel that we have to make the try. After that, well, we wouldn't know where to go, unless it is back here.

"We are aware that, if we get our families out, the Mahdists will be ticked, but they are ticked now. You destroyed two of their four divisions.

Now would be the time to mount any kind of an operation against them. They are spread pretty thin and, if Mr. Jones starts a revolt in Chicago, they will be too busy to do anything against you. You know that they are a long way away and that they are intent on creating a hundred mile buffer around their territory. They kill or conscript everyone they can. A lot of people are just killed, the rest are either forced into the army or moved back towards New Mecca.

“They were intent on destroying you because there are a lot of rumors about you and your group. Several attempts have been made to escape. When they are caught they are killed and their families are killed. It is pretty brutal. If they could wipe you out, there would be nowhere for the escapees to go.”

The Defense Committee discussed the proposal and agreed to accept them, if they were able to return. The Settlement would arm and supply them. Kim was escorted from the room by a trooper to get his men released from jail and moved to a large house at the outskirts of town, where they would be placed under house arrest. If the full council approved the arrangement, they would be released and allowed to prepare for the rescue of their loved-ones. Kim would be notified when the council meeting took place and agreed to attend.

“Mr. Jones. It is obvious that we can’t absorb your followers. There just isn’t enough room in the valleys we have opened up. You and Mr. Turner indicate that you would like to return to the Chicago area and throw out the Mahdists. We don’t have any problem with that. You are free to leave at any time. We will supply you with equipment from the captured stores.”

“Our thanks,” Jacob replied, ignoring the muttering of Michael

Turner, behind him. “We do have another request, however. You have captured General Abdul al-Mecca and seven other men we would like turned over to us. These men were responsible for the death of the townspeople of Sullivan, Illinois. We witnessed this and we must insist on holding them for trial.”

Ed turned to his fellow councilors and discussed the request. Several were against it, saying that the prisoners were theirs and they weren’t sure that the Mahdists would get a fair trial. Zach pointed out that they were going to get rid of the prisoners and the fact that only eight were requested showed that they were not intent on revenge against Mahdists as a whole. Otherwise they would have requested that all prisoners be surrendered.

Hans insisted that he didn’t want to get in the middle of this. They would protect those not accused of war crimes, but he wouldn’t stand in the way of a trial by Jacobs. The Chicago contingent was a potential ally against the Mahdists and he didn’t want to jeopardize that relationship for eight men they were trying to kill just the day before.

The rest of the committee finally agreed, some reluctantly, and Edwin said to Jacob, “Later today, we will have a full town meeting to hold a vote on whether they will confirm our decisions. Until then, we will continue to supply you and your men with the necessities. If the town confirms the decisions made here, you and your men will be free to go, we will supply you with whatever you need for your trip home and the eight prisoners will be turned over to you, with the stipulation that any trial and subsequent action will wait until you are, at least, one day from the Settlement.”

Jacob agreed and took the resentful Michael Turner with him.

As the Defense Committee was preparing to alert Matt and One

Troop to ready themselves to search for Three and Eight Troops, Luther Smith led the missing troops into the square. They were a dusty and tired looking group and there was a rush of families to greet them with glad cries.

Luther, Steven Young, Seth Witherspoon and Stretch Linder followed the Defense Committee back into the council chambers to report. They all collapsed wearily into chairs and accepted the food and drink that was soon placed before them. After they had eaten and pushed back their plates, Luther reported, “We broke the attack and chased the cavalry north. They didn’t put up much of a resistance and just ran. We steered them away from the other fighting and kept them going, trying to capture or kill them. By the next morning, our horses were exhausted and they managed to get ahead of us when we took a break. We heard firing and we moved forward to see what was happening.

“About ten miles north of here is a buffalo wallow. The Sioux had ambushed the Mahdists, who weren’t expecting anything from in front of them. It was Two Wolves. They had heard of the battle and were coming to see if there was a threat to his Confederation. They had spotted the Mahdists and laid for them. They killed them all. The Sioux wanted to do the same for us, but Two Wolves stopped them. Black Moon was furious.

“We ate as their guests, while they showed off the horses and equipment they had captured. We got an hour’s sleep and headed back with the Sioux as escort. I don’t think Two Wolves trusted Black Moon not to hunt us down, so he brought us with him. They are camped beyond the Mound, near the stream. Two Wolves wants to speak with you about all of this.”

The committee sent Zach and Jerry Carter out to meet with the Sioux, while the rest of them prepared for the council meeting.

The council chamber was full and there were people standing around the walls. The stage was occupied by the Defense Council, with Jacob Jones, Michael Turner, Paul Rogers, Kim Allen, General Abdul al-Mecca and Samuel Moosa at a separate table, to the left. These were representatives of the groups of prisoners.

Edwin Johnson called the meeting to order and the murmur of conversation slowly died down. “We are here to make some decisions, ladies and gentlemen. We are sitting here with around three hundred prisoners. We don’t have the resources to hold that many men. So, what do we do with them?” He paused and looked around the room. The audience just stared at him and waited for the meeting to continue. The talk of killing them had quickly died down and the enormity of executing and disposing of three hundred bodies sobered even the most hostile.

“We, the Defense Committee, met with the men you see on the stage here,” he continued, waving at the table where the prisoners. “Mr. Paul Rogers, please stand up,” this last was addressed to the tank commander, who arose and faced the audience. “Mr. Paul Rogers is the commander of the tanks. He has indicated that he would prefer to join us, along with his nine men. This will give us a stronger defense, if we can get both tanks working and can find or manufacture spare parts.

“I would like to call for a vote on whether we accept Mr. Rogers and his men or not. Should the nays have it, Mr. Rogers has been guaranteed his freedom. Everyone approving their becoming members of the Settlement, please, raise your hands.”

The vast majority of the audience voted aye.

“Mr. Rogers, you may follow Ed Reisel, there, and tell your men they

are free of house arrest. Welcome.” Ed turned back to the table.

“Mr. Kim Allen,” he said and the man stood and nodded nervously to the audience. “Mr. Allen is the spokesman for some of the troops. He and his twenty-one men would like to join us, also. They have requested that we allow them to form their own Troop and attempt to rescue their families first. They would return as soon as they could. The Defense Committee recommends approval. The downside would be that this attempt could trigger another attack by the Mahdists, but with two of their divisions destroyed and the other two in a weakened condition, that doesn’t seem too likely, but it is a possibility. They will be provided with supplies, if the Council approves, and will be leaving in the morning.”

There were some questions from the audience, which, in the end, voted approval.

“Mr. Jacob Jones and Mr. Michael Turner represent the majority of the remaining prisoners. There are nearly two hundred and twenty-five of them. As much as the Defense Committee would like them to stay and bolster our defenses, they have requested that we arm, supply and release them. They would like to return to their homes, throw out the Mahdists and form a self-reliant community like ours. The Defense Committee recommends that we approve this. We could use the ally.”

There was a wave of relief from the audience. Many had been nervous about absorbing that number of new citizens. The motion was quickly approved and Jacob Jones thanked them and took the sullen Michael Turner to prepare for a departure late the following morning.

“The final decision is what to do with the Mahdists. The General and his aide represent forty-three prisoners. There is no question of adopting them

into our community. The difficult decision is whether to let them go, imprison them or execute them. Mr. Jones' faction has requested that eight of the men, including the General be turned over to them for trial. These men allegedly murdered recruits or members of the families of the men during the conquest of around the western Great Lakes. I am inclined to agree with them. They have a legitimate claim and grievance against these men." The General looked up from the tabletop he had been staring at and mouthed a silent protest.

"As for the rest, the Defense Committee recommends that we march them to the outskirts of the nearest Mahdist border and let them go," Ed continued. "They will be escorted by two troops and left there. The men will be stripped to underwear and let go." A ripple of laughter and applause greeted this announcement.

Ed held up his hand for silence, "We aren't doing this to make a joke at their expense, but it is a tremendous insult and will send a message to the Mahdists that we will not accept any more interference with our affairs. The Committee, with the help of the Council, has drafted a letter detailing the border between us and telling them that any Mahdists found across that border will be dealt with harshly."

The audience gave noisy approval and Zach stood up, holding up his hands for quiet. "You may be aware that our neighbors, the Sioux, have come calling. Two Wolves was pleased that we beat the Mahdists, but was a little disappointed that they couldn't get in on the looting. I made him a present of half the horses we captured, thirty rifles and ten cases of ammunition.

"Black Moon demanded more, including all of the prisoners, but Two Wolves managed to keep him in line. That man is a maniac. When I spoke

with Two Wolves, privately, he said that Black Moon was losing followers, except for the hard-core killers. The rifles would be handed out to Two Wolves' followers and may damage Black Moon's standing a little more. He warned us that we would face attack if Black Moon got the chance."

The audience roared its approval and the meeting broke up.

The next day, Zach met with Jacob Jones and turned over the dejected prisoners to him. Jacob's men had been equipped with enough weapons, ammunition and supplies to see them home. They planned on swinging north and east to avoid the Sioux and the Mahdist stronghold. When they were far enough north; they would turn due east. They planned on gathering recruits along the way.

"Regretfully, there are quite a few with feelings like Michael Turner," he said. "We will tell those we see about the Settlement and our plans and let them decide for themselves whether to join you, join us or stay where they are. I am afraid that any whites will be strongly encouraged to seek your protection. I am sorry, but bigotry runs both ways."

"Don't worry. I'm sure that any blacks that found their way to the Fundamentalists would find themselves in the same boat. With all of the troubles in the world, you would think that such a petty thing like skin color, race or religion would take a back seat to rebuilding this poor, miserable planet.

"You are welcome any time. When you are settled and the Mahdists are slapped down, we will meet again and talk trade and friendship." Zach shook Jacob's hand and watched as his wagon train disappeared to the northwest.

Later that day, Kim Allen and his men, rearmed said their good-byes.

Matt, who had formed a friendship with the big, blond man, rode with them a ways on the road to the east.

The settlers returned to Cave and BlackValleys. Spring planting continued and life, once again, returned to normal. Jennifer Smith had twins and both mother and sons were doing well.

A month later, Jason Costler and Steven Young mounted up Two and Four Troop and set out as escort for the Mahdists. The deadline had passed for Kim and his troop to return and the Settlement was running out of patience with the prisoners. The Mahdists had continued to make demands on the settlers until Edwin had lost his temper.

Ed had been called in the middle of the morning to the jail. There he met the Officer of the Day, Jason Costler, who reported that the imam of the prisoners demanded to speak with him. Ed, weary of the constant stream of complaints and demands had the imam brought to him.

“What do you want, now?” snapped Ed.

“We insist that we be given our freedom. This is a national day of forgiveness proclaimed by the Mahdi. All prisoners are freed and permitted to reenter society,” was the reply.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, bud, this is not part of the Mahdist domain. I don’t give a hang about any of the Mahdi’s proclamations. Understand? I just don’t care.” As Ed turned to leave, the imam grabbed his arm and spun him around. The act triggered Ed’s temper. He never liked to be touched and he drew his revolver and shot the imam in the chest. When the guards had rushed into the interrogation room, they found Ed with the smoking gun in his hand and the imam dead on the floor.

It was then that Ed ‘lost it’, as the guards said later. He grabbed the

imam by his left arm and dragged him through the guards and down the corridor to the cells. A smear of blood marked their passage. Ed dumped the body on the floor and, waving his gun around, shouted at the rest of the prisoners, "This is what happens when you really piss us off. Anyone else have a complaint? Anyone? Good"

Ed walked to the Officer of the Day's office and threw his gun on the paper-littered desk. "Okay, arrest me," he said to Jason. "I killed the bastard. He grabbed me, but the reason I killed him was because I am dead tired of the B.S. from those pigs. So, arrest me. Hell, hang me."

The members of the Defense Committee who could be found were summoned. When Jason told the story, they looked at Zach for guidance. Jerry Carter and Harry McGregor were of the opinion that Ed should get a medal, but Zach insisted that an inquest be held.

In answer to the general protest, Zach said that the laws of the community must be observed and a hearing must be held to determine the facts and, if necessary, hold Ed for trial. "We cannot just allow random killings, no matter who or what."

Ed supported Zach and twelve men and women were summoned to the council chambers. Zach, as Justice of the Peace, presided. Jason was called to give his testimony, followed by Ed. Under prodding questions, he admitted that the imam had grabbed him. The jury declared the death was justified as self-defense and were dismissed.

"Well, that was a joke," Jerry said. "What a waste of time."

"Jerry, this community is a delicate organism," Zach said to the small group who had stayed after the hearing. "If we let anyone, Ed or you or me, just shoot a prisoner, then we have degenerated to mob rule and vigilantism.

We have to have laws. We have to follow the laws. I was hoping that there was some extenuating circumstance, any extenuating circumstance that would allow us to declare Ed blameless. Knowing Ed, I was sure that there was something to explain this.

“And if there was not, then we would have to try him and give him what punishment he deserved. Ed is worth fifty of that imam, but we would have to do the right and lawful thing. I’m not very good at explaining what I mean, but I hope I got through to you. No one can take the law into their own hands, only the community, under lawful process, has that right. Well, as long as the community does its job.”

Ed interjected, “I agree with Zach. I was wrong. If I had just taken out my gun and shot him, with no provocation, then I would have been a murderer and deserved the punishment which fit the crime.”

The Settlement saw the prisoners march off with a sigh of relief. They were to be taken to the nearest Mahdist border, the men stripped and left.

Chapter 26

Decisions

Spring 2042

A hard time. We have a good set of recruits in the tankers. They were able to get both vehicles repaired and the tankers were split and assigned troopers to bring them up to a full compliment. Fuel has been the biggest problem. While the bio-fuel works for the lighter vehicles, the engineers need something different for the tanks. And we can't run the tanks, because we don't have much of this 'special' fuel.. Andy Scales and Mike Stuart have been working on a formula from bio-fuels, but they can't seem to get the blend right. They have been tinkering with the carburetor and think they may have a modification that will work.

Ed really put us in a bind, with his killing of the imam. I probably would have done it myself, given the same provocation. I am glad that it turned out as it did. The rule of law was preserved and Ed was freed. I don't know what we would have done if we had found Ed guilty.

We are expecting Two and Four Troops back in the next few days. I can't help but wonder what happened to Kim Allen and his men. The addition would have been a big asset to us and covered our losses. However, they did what they had to do, they couldn't abandon their families. The biggest loss is Hans. He was one of the best Scouts we had.

The production of coal has picked up, so there looks to be enough for the near future. We have a sawpit, now. It is a little slow and the boards are

not perfectly even, but Charlie says that he can design and build a planer, when the time comes. Right now, the lumber is being stored in a shed to dry. The herds have come through the winter in great shape and the lambs are dropping. Wool production will be up.

Matt's troop has been assigned scout duty to the south, towards the Aztecs. We are all hoping that they won't come this year. There has been enough blood shed. We have rebuilt the palisade. The Aztecs may fall into the same trap that the Mahdists did. Ed and the militia have collected rocks at the top of the pass to drop on any attackers. We may not kill many, but we will surely disrupt their first attack.

A crew is improving the road to BlackValley and opening up BeaverValley. Homes have been built in BlackValley and a rough camp is being built in BeaverValley. The hunting is great and quite a few pelts have been harvested. We will make winter clothing out of them. The output of the woolen mill has increased and the Council has proposed an expedition to the Mormon Lands. We are starting to run out of salt, again.

The Council met and proposed the new flag and a name. We had been calling ourselves the Settlement, but Settlers seemed too vague for what we thought of ourselves: the nucleus of a new United States. The flag was made up of three stripes, Red, White, Red, with a Blue Star in the center of the middle, White stripe. It met with immediate approval. The name, Americans, was felt to be limiting. After a brisk debate, we settled on calling the Settlement and the three valleys, the State of Jefferson. This will allow us to expand and include other areas under the umbrella name, United States of America. Harry McGregor was booed good-naturedly when he said we could call ourselves Jeffs.

By the time the planting was finished, Two and Four Troops returned with the news that Kim Allen and a lot of families were coming. They rode in the next day, with the citizens of Jefferson there to meet them. They were a bedraggled lot, looking like they had traveled through some tough times. Quarters were assigned and a hot meal was quickly prepared.

Kim cleaned up, slept for a couple of hours and reported to the Defense Committee. They had been taking the report of Jason Costler. He told of how the prisoners had been marched to the Mahdist territory and left. There had been no trouble until the men had been ordered to strip. A near riot broke out and they had just left them, in the end. "I would have had to shoot a bunch of them," Jason said. "It didn't seem right and it could have let us in for more trouble." Jimmy Pinder nodded in agreement.

The Committee greeted Kim warmly when he arrived and asked him to wait until Jason was finished.

Jason ended his report by saying that they had met Kim's group on the way back and had delayed their return to escort them.

Kim rose and thanked the Committee and the citizens of Jefferson for taking him and his families in. "Let me start from the beginning, though. We moved as fast as we thought safe after we left here. We agreed that we would sweep as far east as we could and gather people on the way back.

"We hit the first town and it was a complete surprise. The Mahdists didn't put up much of a fight and several even joined us. We gathered up sixteen families and all the supplies and weapons we could find, loaded them and the women and children into wagons and trucks and headed west.

"The next town was a repeat of the first. There were only eight

families there, but there weren't more than five Mahdist police. The third town was the largest and the Mahdists put up a stiff fight before we were able to kill or scatter them. By the time we had the twenty-two families and all the supplies we could manage, there was a large troop of Mahdists getting close. We had about fifty men and troopers and we threw up a screen to hold the Mahdists. We had one captured machine gun, but it only had a single belt of ammunition.

"There was a running fight and we finally drove them off. We lost a lot of people and most of our supplies. Out of ninety-three women and children, thirty-nine were killed. The Mahdists had split up and one group had hit the caravan before we had a chance to drive them off. We had twenty-six casualties, twelve killed, in the screening force. Hans had been hit and was unconscious for several days and then he developed a fever and was delirious, so he couldn't help us get back on the right trail.

"The fight took us southwest, into the plains and we had a rough time finding food and water. Truthfully, we were lost. A lot of the small towns were burned and I just couldn't find any maps. We wandered for another two weeks looking for I-80 or I70, avoiding Mahdist patrols, until Jason found us. Jason told us that they had swung further south to avoid any pursuit by Mahdists when the prisoners reached a town.

"I...I guess I didn't do too good a job, well, you know, getting them out. A lot of people died 'cause of me. I would like to step down as troop leader," he finished heavily, shoulders slumped.

The committee members looked at each other.

Ed Johnson cleared his throat and said, "Kim, you did what you thought was right. A lot of commanders would dither in a situation like

yours. Action is better than inaction. Doing nothing almost always gets you killed. Getting something done works out more often than not. If every one of us who made a mistake quit, then a lot of us wouldn't be sitting at this table. It was unfortunate that Hans was incapacitated early in the fight, but you made your decision and people got killed, that happens. You have no way of knowing what would have happened if you had done thing differently. Maybe, you would have been completely wiped out. However, you did get the majority back safe.

“You can quit, if you like, but I, personally, think that you planned and executed as well as could be expected, you just didn't have sufficient forces to protect the wagons. So, stop beating yourself up about this and see that your people are settled. Dismissed.”

After the troop leader left, the Committee discussed the situation with the newcomers. They had gained twenty-one more troopers for the numbered troops and twelve more for the lettered troops. It was agreed that Kim would remain as troop commander of Seven Troop. The roster of One, Two, Four and Seven Troops would be shuffled to mix in the newcomers.

Zach noticed a non-descript, slender man sitting at the back of the chamber and asked, “Can we help you? There should be someone outside to point out your quarters.”

The man stood and ran his forefinger rapidly back and forth across the bridge of his nose, a habitual gesture. He was dressed in faded jeans and a sweat-stained, poplin work shirt. The only incongruous point was the webbed belt supporting a service revolver. He looked like a day-laborer hoping for work. As he walked up the aisle, a rueful smile spread his thin lips and twisted up the left corner of his mouth. His blond hair was brush cut and

extended in a long widow's peak almost to his bushy eyebrows. He had deep-set, pale blue eyes surrounded by crow's feet. To everyone's surprise, he stopped at the foot of the dais and snapped a smart salute. "My name is Carl Smythe, S-M-Y-T-H-E. I may not look like much, but I had the honor of being a drill instructor for the Marine Corps Special Forces. For the last few years, I have been hiding that fact from the Mahdists and working as a rather dull witted laborer." In an instant, a stooped-shouldered, vacuous-faced, middle-aged, pot-gutted man with a foolish grin stood before the Committee. "I found out long ago that if you work hard and act dumb, you turn invisible," he continued, resuming his soldierly posture. "What I would like to do now, is offer my services." He finished with a slight bow.

Ed questioned Carl for a few minutes and found that they had been billeted at several of the same posts. Before they too deeply enmeshed in reminiscences, Zach had him confirm Kim Allen's story. He was pressed as to why, since he was an experienced soldier, he hadn't assumed command.

Carl explained that he hadn't wanted to add any more confusion to the situation. He believed that they needed to stop the attack being pushed at the rear guard. When that had been broken, he requested, and was given permission, to take five men and fall back to defend the wagons. As he arrived, he was in time to slam into the flank of the attacking force and scatter them. He reported that the Mahdists had a 'frontal assault' mentality. They were not sure enough of their troops to trust them with independent command, especially after Zach had turned the troops earlier. There had been considerable unrest after that, including a few mutinies, which had been brutally put down.

The Committee assigned Carl as the senior advisor to Four Troop.

His testimony confirmed their earlier decision regarding leaving Kim as commander of Seven Troop. They went on to discuss sending a longer reconnaissance patrol towards the Aztec Empire to determine if there was any evidence of an expedition from that direction. Matt had been out a week and hadn't seen anything. They agreed to send Two Troop the next morning. Zach, Ed and Carl, who had been added to the Committee, would stop by the hotel, where Jason Costler lived, to let him know and get his troop ready for an early departure.

As they mounted the steps to the hotel, they heard raised voices shouting encouragement, the thumping of bodies and the breaking of wood. They paused, looked at each other and hurried into the building. A press of bodies blocked the double doorway to the lobby. Zach grabbed the shoulder of a trooper and yanked him backwards. With an angry cry, the trooper turned with a cocked fist, ready to fight. When he saw Zach's hard stare and tight expression, he hastily lowered his arm and shouted "Attention" as loudly as he could. While this quieted the press in front of them and the blocking troopers melted away, forming a passage through most of the crowd, it wasn't heard over the uproar in the rest of the room. Zach, Ed and Carl formed a flying wedge that punched through the remaining bodies and stopped at the edge of the rough circle formed by troopers. In the middle of the floor, amid the disarray of broken and overturned furniture, three pairs of troopers were doing their best to bludgeon each other into insensibility.

Carl drew his side-arm and pointed it at the ceiling. Realizing that there were rooms above him, he side-stepped and pointed the pistol into a large planter holding a struggling palm, found on one of the scavenging sorties. He fired two shots into the dirt, raising small geysers of potting soil.

The blasts immediately brought silence and froze everyone in the room. The combatants hastily separated and tugged their clothes into some semblance of order. The spectators began slowly to fade up the stairs and out the doors, when Carl, who had picked up a broken chair leg, shouted in his best parade ground voice for them to freeze.

He swung the makeshift baton to include the combatants and shouted, "Form up right here. Now!"

When the bloody and disheveled troopers had formed the semblance of a line, with a space between the two groups of three, Carl approached George Peck and thrust his face within inches of the trooper's. In a surprisingly quiet voice, he asked, "Now, mister, tell me what happened here." Carl's presence was such that nobody questioned his right to take control of the situation.

"Uh, I, uh... nothing," the nervous trooper replied.

"Oh? It doesn't look like nothing. To me, it looks like there was a fight. You know, broken furniture, people punching each other, blood. Looks to me as having all the earmarks of a fight. And, when you address me, trooper, you will say 'Sir', understand that? Sir."

"Yes, uh, sir. We were just discussing something," George replied, trying to stand at attention and ignoring the blood dripping from his nose. He waited a moment, then added a hasty 'sir' when he caught the look in Carl's eye.

Carl moved down the line until he reached Tim Massoglia, who was mopping his split lip. "Well, why don't you tell me just what you were discussing, so vehemently, trooper."

"It was no...", Tim started, but was interrupted when Carl bellowed,

“And don’t you dare try and tell me it was nothing. Don’t you dare or I will have you licking the barn clean.”

Tim hesitated and then admitted, “Someone was mentioning that it was nice to have more girls in town and someone else said something about keeping hands off and someone else said something about their not being able to keep the girls safe and that they, the girls, I mean, would be better off with someone who could protect them.” He paused. “Then the fight broke out, sir.”

Carl knew that he wouldn’t get the names of any ‘someone’ and let that part drop. “Gentlemen, and that includes every trooper in Jefferson, so spread the word, we are all members of the same unit, here. There are no newcomers or old-timers. There are no ‘us’ and ‘them’. There is no ‘mine’ and ‘yours’. If we are to survive, then we WILL get along. The Committee has found no fault in the actions of Seven Troop. If we don’t find fault, then you won’t find fault. Am I understood?”

When there was no response, he repeated, “AM I UNDERSTOOD?” in his parade ground voice. When he swept the assembled troopers, he got vigorous nods from everyone and he turned back to the six troopers standing in the middle of the floor.

“Now, you,” he began in a purring voice, which didn’t fool anyone in the room into thinking he was a pussycat, “will be assigned to a special detail, just for me.” He moved down the line, from George Peck to Todd Haakon, gently thumping each one on the chest as he said, “You will pair off with your ‘dancing’ partner,” pointing to George Peck and William Cernic, then William Ashanti and Todd Haakon and, finally, James Fong and Tim Massoglia, “and spend some quality time at the saw pit, hog farm and barns.

There you will be very cooperative about making sure that you share, equally, the tasks assigned. You will not have any trouble between you or you will answer to me, and, gentlemen, that would cause you a lot of pain and suffering, believe me.”

“Bull. You can’t tell me what to do,” Bill Cernic said and he started to turn away towards the stairs

Zach straightened up from leaning on the doorjamb and replied, “You are entirely correct, Bill. We have no say over you and you are free to do whatever you want.” He turned to the staircase, which was crowded with troopers in various stages of dress, attracted by the shot and noise. “Jason, you are senior troop leader present, get a horse, six days rations, a weapon and a box of shells and have them ready in front of the hotel in fifteen minutes.”

He turned to the now-pale trooper and gently asked, “Fifteen minutes will give you time to collect your belongings and say good-bye, won’t it?”

“Wait,” stuttered the trooper. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean that we have no hold on you and you are free to leave at any time, other than during combat, of course. I am just making sure that you have the supplies to make a start wherever you go. What do you think I am doing?”

“You’re kicking me out?” came the incredulous reply.

“No, I am not kicking you out, old son; you are leaving of your own free will. We recognize the need for independence, but you are not an asset unless you work within the framework of the community. We cannot afford to keep non-assets. So, you are free to go wherever you want.”

“You ARE kicking me out.”

“No, you don’t understand. You have a free choice on whether to

stay and go. Yours is the choice on whether to obey the rules or not.”

“But, but, um, I, uh, I don’t want to go. What about my family?”

“You can’t have it both ways. Either you choose to follow the rules of the community and stay or you don’t and you leave. Your family is free to go or stay. Regardless, you will be welcome to visit with us at any time, but you will follow the rules of any other visitor, when you do. You, or any of you,” Zach swept the room with his hand, “must be willing to follow the rules or get out. We don’t want you. Your actions lead the community into anarchy and that is a formula for destruction. So, what do you want to do?” he asked turning his gaze back to Bill.

“Well, I’ll stay, sir,” he murmured, ducking his head.

“Good, then I will let you superior officer finish giving you your well-deserved punishment. Mr. Smythe, please continue.” Zach settled back into his former position.

Carl nodded to Zach and said to the miscreants, “You will report in front of this hotel at 0600 hours tomorrow. You will be here, ready to work. You will stand at attention, not blocking the door, until someone comes for you. You will neither speak, nor move, until someone comes for you.” He let his eyes sweep the room and continued, “Anyone speaking to you or noticing you in any way will indicate, thusly, that they wish to join you and will be accommodated.”

Just then, Jason entered the room lugging a sack of MREs, an old .30-06 and box of shells, “I couldn’t find a full box, but these are all we have.”

Zach thanked him and indicated a corner of the lobby and asked him to set them there. When Jason had dropped his bundles, Zach announced, “These will be left there for anyone who is no longer interested in staying

with us. If anyone asks, you can regale them with the story of tonight and let them know their options.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I think that it is time to say ‘good night’. These gentlemen have a room to clean up and they can’t do it when it is cluttered with bodies.”

The crowd broke up, with the exception of Jason, who was asked to stay. While the combatants began to clean up the mess, righting furniture and sweeping up, Zach, Ed, Carl and Jason sat around a table in the dining room to discuss the patrol to the South. After Jason had departed to inform his troop and tell Chet Milton that he had been reassigned to Four Troop to replace Tim Massoglia, Ed commented on how he felt there was a need to weld the troops into units.

“First, I realize why we shift the boys around; to keep them from forming cliques, but it breaks the cohesiveness of the team. I say that we leave things as they are, with the exception of replacements and form newcomers into a replacement troop. Have one of the squad sergeants take it over as leader with one of the corporals as sergeant. Do whatever promoting we need to fill those spots and, either forming a new troop or use them for replacements or expansion.

“I would like to see each troop consist of twenty-two troopers. There would be a Squad Leader and a Medic, two sergeants and two corporals. The sergeants and corporals would lead five men apiece. I know that we don’t have enough troopers to do this now, we will need about thirty more, and we can’t reduce the number of troops, but it is a goal.”

The rest agreed with Ed’s assessment and indicated that it should be discussed and voted on at the next Defense Committee meeting and they

broke up for the night. Carl agreed to be on hand for the work party in the morning.

Chapter 27

Summer of Peace

Summer 2042

After we got the discipline thing worked out, the new recruits fit right in. Kim has proven himself to be a good leader. Ed was really sincere about making each troop a team; he started collecting baseball and basketball equipment and forming teams by troop. There has been some joking about setting up player trades between troops. The new troopers are settling in well. Carl Smythe is a gem. He has the troops on a training schedule, which would have the old Special Forces units groaning.

Jason and Four Troop scouted to the South and found evidence of a campaign from the Aztec Empire. Down at a crossing of the Red River there were a group of fresh graves and evidence of a lot of destroyed equipment. Pinder surmises that they tried to cross while the river was in flood and a lot of wagons were lost and men killed. He sent a squad down stream and they found the remains of a hundred or so troops. Hopefully, that means that there won't be an attack this year. We have decided to suspend the Defense Committee until there is sufficient need again.

We are sending an expedition to the Mormon Territory with cloth, cured meat, hides and furs. I would like to send Kim and Seven Troop, this time, but that is a decision for the Council. The next council meeting will be held to elect a new council and governor.

The tanks have been put back in shape; the only thing lacking is fuel.

A few of the newcomers are engineers of various persuasions. They have joined with the two we already have and are working on all sorts of improvements. We call them the Brain Trust. They say they will have some announcements for the next Council Meeting.

Several families have straggled in from the area to which Jacob Jones and his men had returned. They reported that the Mahdists and the Nation of New Africa were at war. The president of the Nation was their old acquaintance Jacob Jones. Non-black families were being escorted to the border, given a map to Jefferson and turned loose. It was only through Jacob's insistence that they weren't killed, instead. The survivors passed a lot of broken down wagons, graves and bodies. I will suggest that we have a permanent patrol in that area to help guide the parties in. Maybe, bury caches of supplies along the way. Looks like we have another situation similar to that with the Sioux. As long as Jones is in power, we should be safe from attack, but if that young hothead and his faction take over, watch out.

As tight as things are getting, with the increased population, we could use more troops. The trickle of new bodies is welcome. We need to expand again. Found other settlements.

The marriage rate is certainly increasing. There have been another dozen weddings in the past month or two. We are losing the female troopers by the bucket-load, as Ed says.

BeaverValley has really taken shape. The timber stands there will be important, once we get a sawmill going, when someone tells us how to build it. Another task for the Brain Trust. The valley is almost ready for settlement. William Smith figures that we should put a dozen families, a small herd and a sawpit there. The fields are fertile and there is plenty of water

from the lake and streams. BlackValley is prospering, as is CaveValley.

Things are looking up for us.

The summer had progressed well for the State of Jefferson. The troops, under the tutelage of Carl Smythe and Ed Johnson, had learned discipline, tactics and esprit de corps. Children were being born and the addition of another doctor, a dentist, several nurses and midwives had provided 'Doc' White with much needed help.

The scope of knowledge expanded with the addition of engineers, plumbers, loggers, experts in animal husbandry and farming. The gristmill had been built and was ready for the wheat and corn harvest. The sawmill was nearing completion and Charlie Wright, with the help of several of the newcomers, had manufactured saw blades. There were several teachers from the Chicago area and the curriculum has expanded to the Junior College level. A night school has been started to share knowledge among the adults. Furniture making, sewing, weaving and handicrafts were the most popular classes.

William Smith stepped down from the commissary job, turning it over to Mitchell Diggs and Toby Charmichael. He had been re-elected governor and spent a lot of his time traveling the settlements.

The farmers had very high hopes for the crops this year, including the wheat from BeaverValley. They recommended that a certain portion be put aside for future years when the crops fail. There was an effort to collect sealable containers to keep out insects and varmints.

The herds increased to the point where they could be culled,

improving the herds. There was an outbreak of some cattle disease, but Carl Llewellyn and his wife, Beth, were able to treat it with medicines salvaged from vet clinics.

Nothing was heard from the Aztec Empire and there was a steady trade between Jefferson and Deseret. Jefferson had sent several expeditions to the west to scout out the inhabitants of the old states of California, Nevada, Oregon and Washington. Matt Busby's troop had been out for several months on this scout.

Summer came to a close and there was the anticipation of a bountiful harvest. In the midst of this idyllic period, a messenger arrived at William Smith's office. The lookouts had reported a group of twenty or so riders rounding the shoulder of the mountain to the east. They weren't Mahdists and one was carrying a white flag. They had camped at the foot of the Mound

William informed Zach and Carl. Carl left to get Four Troop ready and meet them at the Fence. Zach said he would get Six Troop (Mechanized) ready to support them.

Four Troop rode to the Mouth and waited for Six Troop's tank. The strangers were setting up a camp and had sentries posted on the Mound. When the tank arrived, it was stationed at the Mouth to cover any need for a retreat. Four Troop, with William and Zach, rode out to the camp. A man in his mid-fifties with work-worn hands and a long, patriarchal beard stepped out to greet them. "I am Elder Crenshaw. I have been sent by the High Council of New Jerusalem to offer an alliance. Several members of your settlement joined us last year and spoke highly of you. Several months ago, families from the Land of Satan," he waved toward the north, "escaped from that heathen area and joined us, also. Their report was very interesting.

“They said that you had defeated an army of that benighted place. We sang praises to God for his good works and defeat of the forces of the anti-Christ. This mission is to form a strong army of Christian soldiers and put all heathens to the sword in a Crusade against the Mahdists.”

William cleared his throat and replied, “Elder, we will have to take this up with the Council. It would be easier to make this presentation if we knew more of your plans for this Crusade.”

Elder Crenshaw looked at Zach and Carl when he answered William’s question. “Well, we have forces which are prepared to march north to the heart of that black land. We will destroy everyone of the devil’s spawn we meet and pull down their places of dark worship until no stone is left standing. You will take your forces and march east, doing the same.”

Carl, who had been fidgeting since the Elder had begun, said, “Say, this ‘destroy everyone’ bit. Exactly, what does that mean?”

The Elder looked surprised. He lifted his hat and scratched his head as if looking for a trick in the question. “Why, we mean to destroy every Muslim we find, man, woman or child over the age of three. Those younger will be taken into the Church and purified of their taint and adopted by God-fearing families.”

“Okay,” said Carl. “And after that? What are your plans?”

“We will continue the crusade. There is a colony of Jews in Florida, blacks have returned to their heathen ways along the Gulf and, I understand, the lost tribes have claimed the lands north of you.”

“Lost tribes. Lost tribes. Oh, you mean American Indians?”

“Yes. They are part of the ten lost tribes of Israel.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Carl. “You want us to help you cleanse

the earth of Muslims, Jews, Blacks and Indians. Is that right?"

"You misunderstand me, brother. Yes, the Muslims and Jews will be eliminated, but the Blacks will be returned to the belief of Christ and we will watch over them and train them to till the soil and adopt their rightful place in God's ordained order."

William quietly asked, "Do you know a Parson Simmons, by any chance?"

Again the Elder ignored William and spoke to Zach. "Oh, yes. Parson Simmons is a respected member of the High Council. He is a guiding light of New Jerusalem. He codified many of our principal rules. Without his guidance, the many Christian communities would not have been welded into the Hammer of God. Our humble army, the Soldiers of Christ, was formed by him and he led our efforts to bring all of the fragmented communities together."

William stood up and thanked the Elder. He offered to supply the delegation with anything they needed. After they had ridden away, Zach said in wonder, "Another bunch of fanatics. Did all of the sane people die of the plague? William, I think that Elder Crenshaw is a racist. Did you get that feeling?" he finished, grinning.

"That I did, Zach, that I did. He wouldn't even look at me. I can imagine what they consider the 'rightful place in the ordained order' would be for blacks. Charlie is going to have a few choice words to say when he hears about this. If I'm not mistaken, the New Jerusalemites are planning on bringing back slavery."

They rode back and called a meeting of the Council for the following morning. Carl met with Ed and a troop was dispatched through the Back

Door to scout their visitors' back trail. They strengthened the Fence and Back Door with Militia Troop A, which was on call at the time.

The Council, joined by the Defense Committee discussed Elder Crenshaw's proposal. Several of the councilors were for forming a mutual defense pact, but were concerned by the desire to use mass slaughter. The hint of reestablishing slavery was the final argument for refusing to deal with the Fundamentalists.

Because of the obvious dislike of blacks by the Fundamentalists, Zach and Carl were appointed to tell Elder Crenshaw of their decision. Carl suggested that they send William, Charlie and Vinght Nguyen as the delegation, but that was considered as 'throwing gasoline on a fire to put it out' and the Council didn't want to antagonize the New Jerusalemites, if possible.

Later that afternoon, Zach and Carl met with Elder Crenshaw. After the exchange of greetings, Carl said, "Elder, the Council has weighed you offer. As regards to joining in on an attack on the Mahdists, we have to refuse on the grounds that we have another threat from the southwest in the form of the Aztec Empire of Mexico. They have sent one expedition against us already, although it met with disaster in the form of a flash flood and was forced to turn back.

"We also have a mutual defense treaty with the Sioux, so that would negate any attack against them, at least until we meet and end the treaty."

"Gentlemen, God would forgive ignoring the treaty with the heathen Sioux to further His works."

Zach said, with a tight smile, "Elder, when I give my word, it's given. I don't care who forgives me for breaking it, I never would."

Crenshaw frowned. “Are you telling me that you will not join our Crusade?”

Carl put a restraining hand on Zach’s arm. “Elder, we do not have the resources to engage in a major campaign, at this time. Further, you don’t realize what you are facing should you defeat the Mahdists. There is a group north of them that have formed New Africa. They are fighting the Mahdists. Beyond the Sioux are the Mormons and they have a strong, well-trained force called the Dannites. So, I would suggest that you strengthen your borders, ensure the freedoms of all your people, of whatever faith or race and leave the Mahdists and the New Africans to wear themselves out.

“When that happens, we can liberate the people under the Mahdists domination, let them follow whatever religion they prefer and bring peace to them. This talk of religious cleansing is really not to our liking, nor is it beneficial, in the long run.”

Elder Crenshaw’s brow had been darkening during Carl’s speech and, at the end of it; he stood and pointed a finger at them. “You are siding with the heathens and refusing to join the Crusade to rid this land of non-believers and those fallen away from the work of God.

“Parson Simmons told us that you, too, had strayed from the Path of Righteousness, but we could have led you, lovingly, back to God. Now, you have refused God’s help and we, his avenging angels, will flog you back to Grace and your penance will be horrible to behold.

“Consider this your last warning. Join us or be declared apostate.”

“Elder,” said Zach, also standing. “If you want to go to war with the Mahdists, be our guest. If you want to go to war with the Israelites, go right ahead, though they were always pretty tough. If you want to go to war with

New Africa, have at it and we will get rid of two racist groups. But, if you go after the Sioux we will be there to side with them. If you want to go to war with us, bring it on and we will punish you like we punished the Mahdists.

“Now, you have twenty-four hours to get out of Jefferson or you will be arrested for trespass.”

With that, the two men turned, mounted their horses and rode back through the gap, passing the tank on the way.

“Think I pissed them off?” asked Zach.

“You nearly pissed me off, and I am on your side, bucko,” answered Carl, rubbing the bridge of his nose and laughing.

They reported the result of their meeting to the Council. They decided that a new lookout post should be established on the east slope of the mountains and a new troop be constituted as Rangers. This group would carry out scout, exploration and hunting patrols in the forests. Zach, Ed and Carl were charged with the organization of the new troop.

Later in Ed’s house, they discussed the makeup of the ranger troops. Carl suggested that there not be too many and that the patrols would consist of two or three men at a time. This would allow for a series of patrols to be out at the same time. They settled on ten member troops, initially, and would look for those with hunting and woodcraft experience. Harry McGregor was contacted about being the advisor for the group, since he was in the border scouts and had a hunting background. A call went out for volunteers.

Two weeks later, Harry met with the Defense Committee and presented his list of prospective candidates. “I picked single, male troopers. I interviewed the volunteers and took them out for a day scout in the woods. The ones left after the first cut, I took out for several days where they had to

find specific points, set up camp and supply their own food and water.

“I cut it down to ten by taking the survivors of the second cut and scattered them in that large valley beyond BeaverValley. There were twenty of them and we played tag for a couple of days. Then, I took the twenty to the shooting range and Carl ran them through a series of shooting tests. The best woodsmen and shots were taken to make the ten.”

“Why only unmarried males?” Zach asked.

“We may be away on scouts for weeks at a time and that is too much pressure to put on a marriage. I know, the Rangers are only supposed to be used locally, but we all know that, eventually, they will be sent on long-range scouts amongst the Mahdists, the Aztecs and Jerusalemites.

“As for males only, well I don’t want to dwell on how well a scout will take place with sexual tension in the air.”

The Defense Committee agreed with the selection and ordered Harry to form the group.

Three weeks later the Rangers were mustered in front of the hotel. They were dressed in brown and forest green shirts and pants, which had been sewn by Belinda Rush and Mona Mitchell out of the wool cloth being produced by the weavers. The dyes were from plants supplies by ‘Doc’. Rafael Torres had made the calf high leggings. He had finally developed a method of tanning, which provided the settlement with all of the leather they needed.

They were equipped with long hunting knives or machetes, throwing knives, a pistol and a carbine or a sawed-off shotgun. As they stood there under the admiring eyes of the crowd, they became increasingly nervous. Harry introduced them and dismissed them.

For the next few weeks, Harry took them out on extended scouts, as a group. After that, he split them into three groups and sent them on short scouts of a day or two. By the end of the third month, groups of two and three were making extended patrols that lasted for up to two weeks. Harry would consider anything longer than that as a sign that the patrol had run into trouble.

As each patrol returned, additions were made to the large-scale map in the Courthouse. Caches of weapons, ammunition and supplies were stashed in convenient caves and hidden shelters. Several more valleys were discovered, rich with trees and wildlife. Over the last decade, when the population had plummeted, the flora and fauna had made a remarkable comeback.

The Rangers proved their worth when, as Fall was approaching, they spotted a large party from the Aztec Empire skirting the western edge of the mountains, forty miles south of the Back Door. While Yancey Miles and Peter Armindez shadowed them, Adam Silver raced back to report. One and Four Troop intercepted them and quickly took them prisoner after a short firefight. Several of the Imperials were killed and a dozen more wounded when the Rangers, who had joined Yancey and Peter, opened fire from the trees, causing the surrender.

Peter Armindez questioned the prisoners and was told that a large force was being prepared to attack Jefferson. An expedition the prior year had been caught trying to cross the Red River by a flash flood and most of the supplies and several dozen men had been lost.

The captured men were scouting campsites, water and defenses. Matt treated their wounded, confiscated their arms and sent them back with a

warning to stay away from Jefferson. Several Rangers were detailed to follow them until they passed beyond the southern boundary of Jefferson, while Matt and the Troops returned to Mitchell and reported on the incursion.

The Defense Committee proposed a long scout by five of the Rangers, led by Harry McGregor, to establish a post at the southern end of the claimed territory. They were to look for a habitable valley where a settlement could be established.

Zach expressed his concern that there were not enough citizens to protect all of the area they claimed to Sarah when they were relaxing after putting William to bed. Sarah smiled and said that they were doing their part. Zach had bent his head back to his book and read a full page before the import of her statement hit him.

As the days were becoming shorter and the harvest season was upon them, a delegation from the Mormon Settlements arrived at the Fence. Matt, who recognized several of the men, greeted them. They had brought several wagons filled with salt and manufactured goods, such as furniture, glassware and pottery. Their guards were sturdy young men, obviously well trained and disciplined.

They were assigned a campsite near the Mound. As the younger members set up camp, the older men met with the Council and Defense Committee. The leader of the Mormons, a lean, kindly looking man with a grey beard and pale blue eyes, introduced himself as John Hazelwood. He sent greetings from the Elders of the Church of Latter Day Saints and regretted that the agreement worked out between Matt and them had never been ratified, but understood after he had heard of the battle from Two Wolves. The Elders had decided to send their own expedition to trade for

wool and other goods.

William welcomed them and apologized for the delay in getting the ratified trade agreement back to them. “Before we sit down and discuss trade, however, there is another issue that concerns you,” he said. William told the story of the Soldiers of Christ and Zach and Carl informed them of the increased activity of the Aztec Empire.

Elder Hazelwood nodded and admitted that there was an additional reason for traveling to Jefferson. “We had a delegation from the Aztec Empire, too. They informed us that the Aztec Empire claimed Deseret and that we would surrender ourselves to them. We would be required to pay taxes and provide a levy of troops. It appears that they will begin a campaign against you, soon.”

“We encountered the scouting expedition they sent and headed them back to where they came from,” Carl returned. “We figure that they will come next spring, but have men keeping watch on the southern border. What we do need are more settlers to protect the area we claim.”

“There are several families that have escaped from California and are residing in Deseret. They are Gentiles and are anxious to learn if you are accepting any more families. We would have brought them, but were not sure how things stood. If you are willing to have them, we will send a message back.

“The only thing we ask is that you reimburse us for the supplies and equipment we give them. We will have need of all our arms, if the Aztecs attack.”

“Certainly. How many families are there?” William asked.

“When I left, there were two dozen, about forty-eight to sixty

persons. However, they have been arriving at, around, three families, twelve to twenty people, a week, so there may be more now,” replied Hazelwood.

The Council agreed to provide the Mormons with three wagonloads of food to replace what the Gentiles were supplied with. A Troop would travel with the Mormons on their return and take over escort duty, supply the newcomers with weapons and equipment and return the Mormon’s arms and equipment to them.

That evening, the Mormons released a pigeon to start the Gentiles on their way. A feast was held for the traders that lasted well into the night. Out of respect for their guests, the citizens of Jefferson refrained from alcoholic beverages. The next day began three days of trading. The three wagons of salt were traded for cloth; seven milk cows; corn and leather. Individuals traded their wares for those offered by the Jeffersonians.

Two Troop, under Jason Costler, would travel with the Mormons and intercept the Gentiles and lead them into Jefferson. They had seven wagons loaded with supplies, both to provide for the return trip and to compensate the Mormons. In addition to the food, one of the wagons was loaded with weapons and ammunition.

After seeing them off, Zach sat with Ed and Carl in the lobby of the hotel. “Seems the Aztecs are feeling their oats. I wonder if they will hit the Mormons first or us. I would imagine that our treatment of the scouting party is going to irritate them no end,” Carl mused.

“I would suggest that we send someone to do a deep scout to the south. Either Rangers or Troopers. Rangers would be able to travel off the beaten track, but a cavalry troop would be faster,” Zach added.

Ed tapped out his pipe, in which he had been using a dried mixture of

his own devising, and said, "I would send a troop or, even, half a troop. If they are careful, they will be able to avoid any trouble and we would get a timely report.

"Another thing we need to do is find room for another dozen or two dozen families. Temporarily, we can house them in Mitchell, but we have to open up more farming and grazing land if we are to provide enough supplies for them for the future. I would suggest that large valley in which Harry trained the Rangers last year. It is far larger than Beaver, Black and Cave valleys combined.

"Let's ask Harry if he has a few Rangers to guide a group to, what, NewHomeValley? Big Valley? We should send Pete Lincoln, as an engineer, to survey for a road, Leif Erickson as a miner, maybe the Gordons, Mary and Jim. They are geologists, aren't they? Add a few Troopers for additional protection and labor."

They refined Ed's plan and presented it to the Council. A rider was sent out to BeaverValley to request the Gordon's help. The expedition was assembled and packhorses loaded. Matt led the first and second squads of One Troop on the deep scout to the south and Evan Parker and the third squad of One Troop was assigned to the exploration party.

Chapter 28

New arrivals and threats of war

Summer/Fall 2042

I am hoping that we have fobbed off the 'Soldiers of Christ' with the story about having trouble with the Aztec Empire. Unfortunately, I was a little undiplomatic with Crenshaw and I can see some friction there. Ed Johnson was disappointed that they only had a little tobacco and was hoping that some sort of trade could be initiated. He is using a concoction of herbs he and 'Doc' came up with, but he is less than satisfied. The Fundamentalists' ideas about ethnic cleansing and the subjugation of non-whites are disturbing and I agree with Carl that we don't want to get involved with them.

An additional group of settlers, especially if there are several hundred, would be a huge boon to Jefferson. It will allow us to open another valley towards the south of the existing settlements and form a base for defense or attack against the Aztec Empire.

The trade with the Mormons has replenished our salt stocks in time for the harvest season. I am wondering whether we should send out another expedition to gather cattle, though it will have to be someplace different to let the cattle herds along the river reproduce. The valleys in the Rockies north of Denver might be a good place to try.

We are all hoping that Matt's scout will turn up nothing and that the Aztec's will wait on their invasion plans, though that would not bode well for

California or the Mormons. Any attack on California will drive more refugees towards the north and east and we will incorporate any that we can. I am hoping that our agreement with the Mormons to repay them for supplying the refugees will encourage them to help the Gentiles on their way. Personally, I think it is shortsighted of the Mormons to push on the refugees when they could form a significant force if allowed to settle in Deseret, but we really don't know the situation. Maybe, the Dannites are strong enough to meet the threat from the Aztec Empire or there may not be enough arable land for settlement. Anyway, we can use a lot more people, after BigValley is opened up.

Through all of these troubles, the one thing that bothers me is the lack of military leadership with our enemies. The Mahdist attacks have all been frontal attempts to overwhelm us with numbers. Their forces were committed piece-meal without coordination between the cavalry, infantry, artillery or armor. The Aztecs have shown incompetence in their campaign by getting beaten by nature. Ed is of the opinion that, up to this point, the commanders are either family or inner circle members. Be that as it may, when we come up against a knowledgeable general, we will have a real fight on our hands.

The trail to BigValley had been surveyed and willing hands were busy building the road and clearing a building site for the new settlement. The Council had decided that this would consist of a mix of existing Jeffersonians and newcomers. Volunteers were called for and selected.

A cattle drive was planned and carried out and several hundred head were brought in and moved to BigValley. They settled in the well-watered

meadows. Sheep, pigs and goats had been included.

Since the sawmill hadn't been able to put out lumber in the volumes which would be needed for the anticipated number of families, an expedition was sent to Rawlins to tear down buildings and salvage lumber, bricks and hardware. They found that reivers had been there and a large portion of the town had been fired. They were able to bring back eight wagons of supplies, which were sent over the new road and BigValley was soon ringing with the sound of hammers and saws.

Twice the Rangers turned back strangers on the eastern slopes of the mountains, both times with no violence. They said they were peaceful hunters, but it was more likely that they were scouts for the Fundamentalists. Zach wondered how many weren't caught and what it meant. Carl and Ed felt that this was the prelude to an attack and more scouts were assigned to patrol the eastern border of Jefferson. Carl and Harry encouraged the formation a new Ranger Troop, splitting the existing one and assigning new members to bring them up to strength from newcomers. Several of the Rangers have already resigned due to marriage, but were relocating to BigValley.

Work was halted on the new settlement and road to gather in the harvest. The grain crops had exceeded all expectations and the vegetables and fruits required a scramble for anything which could be used for canning and an order to the patrols that pressure cookers and canning supplies were top priority.

Jerry Hogg and William January had devised a drying oven for the fruits and vegetables and a large portion of the harvest was dried, including meats, and sealed in plastic containers. A feast was held to celebrate the last of the gathering.

Two weeks later Two Troop returned with the West Coast refugees. Instead of a couple of dozen families, there were just over fifty. They camped near the Mound and William and the Council rode out to address them.

“We want you to know that you are all welcome here. There are a few more of you than we expected, but we will find room, if you want to stay,” said William. He went on to explain the Jeffersonian Constitution, the required service in the military and the general customs, which had developed, including polygamous marriage.

“Now that you know a little more about us, let me outline your options,” he continued. Holding up one huge hand he lifted his index finger. “You can stay here and join us, agreeing to abide within the Constitution.” Another finger. “Head east and join the Mahdists.” Another finger. “Any of you who are American Indian, and desire to join the Sioux, will be provided with an escort north.” Another finger. “Those of you who wish to join up with the Fundamentalists, we will escort you southeast.” He raised his thumb. “There is a group of African-Americans up in the Chicago area that has set up New Africa.

“Anyone who wishes to leave will be provided with enough provisions to reach your destination. I am assuming, of course, that those who wanted to join the Aztecs would have remained in California and those who wanted to join the Mormons have remained in Deseret.”

A short, bearded man sitting at the back raised his hand and, after he was recognized, said, “Pardon me, sir, but there is one group you have overlooked. There are several families of Jews and we have heard that there is a community from Israel somewhere to the east in Florida or Georgia.”

William took a deep breath and slowly blew it out. “Sir, there are or

were a group of refugees from Israel given permission by the US Government, when there still was a US Government, to land in Florida north of Miami and south of Jacksonville. The plague had wiped out nearly everyone there and the survivors were relocated north, into Georgia.

“We had a recent meeting with the Fundamentalists and they hinted that there was still a settlement there. The major sticking point you will find is that between here and there lies the Fundamentalist domain. They are, sad to say, anti-Semitic and I doubt that you could sneak through half the country and I, personally, wouldn’t trust them to keep their promise to let you pass.

“You and your families are more than welcome to settle here, until you decide what to do, with the stipulation that you are to follow our rules, the same as any other citizen.”

The Jew pursed his lips and nodded sadly. Briefly, he conferred with his fellows and turned back to where William was standing. “Sir, we accept your kind offer.”

Another man stepped forward and said, “We are of the Muslim faith. We have heard about the Mahdists from the Mormons and our escorts and would like to know if you would accept us into your community.”

“Are you a follower of Sharia law?” asked Robert Coltrane.

“Our faith requires that we are,” the man answered.

“Then, sir, you are not welcome here, unfortunately,” Robert answered. “The existence of two laws in one community was a cause of the disintegration of our country. You are free to travel wherever you wish, but Jefferson has decided that only one set of laws will be followed, our Constitution.”

“But we practiced our laws in Modesto and there was no problem,

there,” the Muslim protested.

“Let me ask you a few questions, sir, and maybe we can settle this once-and-for-all,” Robert said. “Do you allow your women to work outside the home in the company of men not related to them? Are they allowed to attend whatever religious services they wish? Can they vote, drive a vehicle, shoot a weapon, travel where they will?”

“Of course not. It is against our beliefs. They would be punished for those transgressions,” he replied, indignantly.

“Our women are allowed and, even, encouraged to do these things. They are on equal footing with the men. Our daughters have fought and died to protect the community, our women are elected to the Council, they can vote, speak to whom they wish and engage in whatever activity they wish.

“We have females as engineers, weavers, teachers, nurses, midwives, cattlemen, shepherds and a myriad of other occupations. So, sorry, but you, and any others who believe the way you do, are not welcome and will not be allowed to enter.”

There were no other questions and those who had decided not to join the citizens of Jefferson remained in camp near the Mound, the rest were brought through the Gap and up to Mitchell, where they parked their wagons on the square, spilling into surrounding streets.

As they passed through the Gap, a census was taken of the names, ages, occupations, interests and hobbies of the families. The sixteen through twenty-five year old males were told to report to the Hotel at nine o’clock the next morning, along with any of the sixteen through twenty-five year old females who wanted to join the auxiliary troops. The families were guided to the courthouse, where they would be assigned housing for the night.

As the new families filed in, a committee member gave them an address for their homes, a map of the town and a person from the community to show them around and get them settled. After that, they were given a quick health exam by ‘Doc’ White, Robert Allen or Barbara Parker, assisted by the nurses, Melissa Grant, Frank and Johanna Summers and Mary Samuelson. Stewart Silver finished up with a dental exam.

By late afternoon, all the newcomers had been processed and settled in to their new homes. Those who had decided to travel on, including the three Muslim families and eight families bound for the southeast, were given several days of supplies, but had to surrender any weapons that had been loaned out of the Jefferson Arsenal. There was some grumbling about this, but Zach had One and Two Troops to back him up.

One Troop was assigned to guide the Muslims to the Mahdist lands, while Two Troop escorted the Fundamentalist-bound group. They each returned in two days to report that their charges had safely crossed their respective borders and had been met by a patrol of Mahdists or Fundamentalists. Jason brought back a prize for Ed, a two-pound sack of tobacco, which the leader of the Fundamentalist patrol had collected as a way of thanking them for the way their charges had been treated.

Ed thanked him profusely, but, after filling his pipe and tobacco pouch, turned the rest over to the quartermasters, Jasper Poole and Vinght Nguyen. Ed’s first puff of real tobacco brought a look of utmost pleasure to his face and he walked away patting the pocket containing his tobacco pouch.

The newcomers were incorporated quickly into the community and were a tremendous help with the remaining preparations for winter. Several families joined the new settlement in BigValley, including the Rosaia clan, a

doctor and a teacher.

The Defense Committee sat down and went over the manpower lists to include the newcomers. They decided that two new troops would be formed, Ten Troop and Third Rangers, and stationed in BigValley. In addition, Nine Troop would consist of the married troopers moving to BigValley. The Rangers would be responsible for patrols along the southern reaches of Jefferson. This would require the building of barracks.

The existing troops were expanded to spread out the newcomers amongst the veterans. The arsenal was split to provide the southern contingent with weapons and ammunition. Each citizen, fifteen and older, were issued rifles and ammunition and expected to become familiar with the firing and care of the weapons. A permanent command post was established in Mitchell. Leo Rosaia, before he left with his clan to BigValley, had set up an automatic scanner for long- and short-range radio transmissions. This became one of the most boring of the assignments to which a trooper could be detailed since the only thing they heard was static.

There was some discussion about assigning one of the Mechanized Troops to BigValley, but the Committee decided that for mutual support, the tanks should be kept together. Charles Scalini worked with Charlie Wright on the manufacture of spare parts. He had had to do the same thing for the train engines they maintained in the Central Valley of California.

Over the first few months of occupation, the Big Valley Rangers found several ingress points from the plains into the mountains. Two were kept open and guarded by Ten Troop; the others were blocked by rock falls. The buildings had all been completed by the first snow, though cords of wood and loads of coal had to be brought in from the other settlements to provide fuel

for the winter.

A sawmill was planned for BigValley that would be run by waterpower. Several windmills were built on the higher ridges to provide electricity and the roof of every building had its solar panels. A small lode of gold had been discovered and a casual mining of the metal was undertaken, though mostly for a hobby, since there was no need for coinage or a medium of exchange.

Hans Silverstein had started the manufacture of jewelry, mainly wedding rings. The rings were given to prospective couples upon the reading of the banns for the third time. He also made medals that were as prizes for game and sport events. He had asked the patrols to salvage any jewelry they find and he used the stones and metals to create new pieces. This didn't take away from his regular assignment of fixing delicate machinery and repairing weaponry.

Several of the newcomers had experience with bow hunting and the amateur archery tournaments have turned into training sessions. The Second Rangers were adopting the bow as their primary weapon, though it was still in review. As Ed put it, "On the one hand, it would save us the problem with ammunition, since arrows and crossbow bolts can be manufactured from materials at hand. On the other hand the range is short."

The Roasias thought that they could plant and maintain grape vines. They asked the Council to instruct the patrols to scavenge for yeast, bottles and corks from home brewing shops. The Churchills also requested brewing supplies to enable them to start a brewing operation.

Sarah commented to Zach one evening as they were sitting in front of the fire, "We are really turning into a self-sustaining community, Zach. I hope

that nothing spoils it for us.”

Zach put his arm around her and rubbed her swelling belly with his other hand. He looked at little William sleeping on the rug in front of the fire. “I hope so, too,” he said. “The Mahdists are pretty well battered to the point they won’t be able to mount a campaign. Besides, they have their hands full with New Africa and, maybe, the Fundamentalists.

“It depends on whether the Fundamentalists want us for refusing to join them on their New Crusade or the Mahdists for being Muslim. I figure that they want the Mahdists more, but we have an eye out and will be ready if they go all stupid on us.

“The Aztec Empire seems to be intent on conquering California. The expedition they sent against us was pretty small and the scouting party was just checking on our defenses. The west coast is a much more desirable target and they seem to have committed considerable resources there. The newcomers say there are thousands of troops and, even, small planes there. They said that the bulk of the captives have been moved south to Old Mexico and that they are, probably, destined for the mines and farms. It seems the Aztecs have reinstituted the practice of slavery. The refugees are heading north to Oregon and Washington, with a few crossing the Sierra Nevada Range to Utah and Nevada. A lot are dying in the Sierras, more in the deserts of Nevada and some, like our group get through and find other places to resettle.

“You know, we lost about eighty-five to ninety percent of our population from the flu, the dirty bombs, disease and the unrest that followed. From 350 million people to under 35 million in the course of three years. Since then, the Mahdists, Sioux, Aztecs, Reivers, Fundamentalists and everyone else with a gun and three followers seem to be intent on dropping

the population still further. I wouldn't be surprised if we have dropped to under ten million as a population in this country.

“I spoke with ‘Doc’ and he said that our birthrate is lower than our mortality rate. And we are a fairly stable society. If people would just stop attacking us, we could get on with the rebuilding process. It just frustrates me that there is so much land that is unoccupied, so much rebuilding to do and everyone still wants to destroy.”

His voice rose until he awoke William and he got up to take care of him, apologizing to Sarah over his tirade. She smiled at him and urged him to hurry back, “I need some snuggle time, dear.”

Chapter 29

Winter of Cold, Spring of Change

Winter/Spring 2042/2043

The new additions to our community are going to be big assets. In addition to more medical personnel, we have additional scientists, craftsmen, teachers, brewers, vintners, a family expert in raising fowl, a psychiatrist, more farmers, artists and, most importantly, enough troopers for an additional Ranger and mounted infantry troop. These are being integrated into our new defensive posture. The new troops, along with a regular troop for a new settlement made up of settler troopers (this is Carl's descriptive) have been assigned to a southern command. They will be responsible for building defenses and patrolling the south.

Our enemies seem to have eyes elsewhere, so I am anticipating a quiet spring. I feel sorry about the west coast, but we will need more time to integrate our forces. I am anticipating a further influx from the west coast and, maybe, from New Africa. The Sioux have pretty much run out all non-Indians from Confederation lands.

The use of bows has really taken on a life of their own with the Second Rangers. What started as a low-key training session by holding archery contests has escalated to standard use by our soldiers. In the woods, I can see where they will be beneficial: they are quiet, close and deadly. Out on the plains is another matter. They don't have the range and cannot be fired as rapidly as automatic weapons. If we ever revert back to single-shot weapons,

they will come into their own. For now, the rangers can use them when patrolling in the forests, but will be armed with modern weapons when in open ground.

The increased patrols have led to the discovery of additional settlement sites, from small, one or two family valleys for a sheep or cattle operation to large, multi-family operations for mining, logging, herding and hunting. We have been able to close ingress points to the mountains and set up lookout points throughout our territory.

As usual, however, our expansion has raised as many problems as it has solved. The additional settlements have increased our production, but have spread us thin. It will take time to concentrate our forces if attacked, though we have more troops under arms. The additional settlements have led to political problems. The Council is now elected by region, rather than population and it is difficult to meet during the winter months. The seat of government is still in Mitchell, but BigValley has to be autonomous during the months it is closed off from the other settlements, except by ski and snowshoe travel.

There are still several expeditions I would like to send. One to the northwest to open trade there, another to the Gulf Coast through Texas and others to some of the smaller towns that might not have been hit too heavily by reivers. Those places with salvageable buildings should be ripped down and the lumber and fixtures brought back to the settlements, until our homegrown lumber is ready.

Snow came early and the winter proved severe. At night there was the

sound of trees cracking when the freezing sap expanded and forced the wood to split. The streets were trodden paths between mounds of snow. The lookouts were pulled from their posts after several troopers were treated for frostbite and hypothermia. The water systems froze and the settlers had to melt snow for their own use. Daily, ice holes had to be chopped in the ice to allow the livestock to drink and the stored hay was being used at an alarming rate.

Travel between the settlements was impossible during the several blizzards and difficult between them. The tradition of community-wide snowball fights was continued and provided hours of enjoyment. Skiing contests and ice hockey proved to be popular.

Father Tillford and John Tobias in Mitchell and Paul Hind in BigValley celebrated Christmas, on a rare clear evening, with church services. The church in Mitchell was filled with the music from a small pump organ what a patrol had found and the voices of the congregation singing Christmas carols. Smaller celebrations took place in the rest of settlements dotted throughout the territory of Jefferson.

The Rangers and Troopers, who conducted them on cross-country skis, maintained patrols. They were limited to staying in the mountains after a patrol was caught in a blizzard while out on the plains. Fortunately, they were able to reach a riverbed and build an emergency shelter to last out the storm.

During one of the lulls in the successive wave of storms that came out of Canada, a messenger arrived from Two Wolves. He requested help to find a hunting party. One and Two Troop formed a line across the plain and spent two days searching for the lost party to the west and south. By noon of the second day, a weak plume of smoke was spotted against the dirty white sky.

The hunting party had sought shelter along a creek bottom, but wolves had spooked their horses and they were left stranded.

After getting them back to the Ranch, 'Doc' treated them for frostbite and hypothermia. Turtleback developed pneumonia and was kept in the hospital. The rest of the party left after two days with Two Wolves, who had stayed as a guest of Zach and Sarah. They gave him a dozen cows as a friendship gift and promised to keep Turtleback until he was able to travel and the weather permitted.

A week later, a warm wind began blowing from the south. Overnight the snow melted and the weather turned warm and dry. The clouds broke for the first time in months and the communities began celebrating the end of winter.

The next day, a rider found Ed Johnson at the command post and reported that there was a contingent of Sioux at the Gap. Ed climbed into his spring wagon and drove to the hospital. There, he ordered the rider to return to the Gap and tell Two Wolves they will bring Turtleback down immediately.

Two Wolves was waiting with a party of his followers, a spare horse for Turtleback and the borrowed horses loaned to the hunting party. These last were loaded with two buffalo robes each, a gift to Jefferson. He declined an invitation to stay, "These warm winds may last for weeks or die out tonight. I want to get back before you have to send out a search party for me."

Ed thanked him for the gifts and watched them gallop away. With the robes loaded in the wagon, he made his way back up the hill to the Commissary. Jasper Poole and his assistant unloaded the robes. Ed instructed

him not to issue them until the Council decided who would get them and drove away to find William.

“We got twelve buffalo robes from Two Wolves as a thank you gift. I told Jasper not to issue them just yet. I figure that you and the Council, and maybe the medics, should decide on what to do with them, since there aren’t enough for everyone,” he said to William when he found him.

“The oldest citizens should probably get them,” he answered and ticked off on his fingers, “‘Granny’ Campbell, the two Pelligrinos, Constance Olsen, William Starr and Emilio Rosaia. That’s half. Give the rest to ‘Doc’ for the hospital?”

Ed nodded his agreement. He went back to check up on the command center and William crossed the muddy street to the Commissary to tell Jasper their decision.

The Chinook lasted three days more, enough time to send supplies to the valley settlements and check up on the livestock. On the third night, the wind changed and roared out of the north, bringing with it several feet of snow over the next few days. The paths became treacherous with the layer of ice under the snow and the hospital was kept busy with broken bones and contusions.

Finally, in late April, the weather warmed and the rains came. By the end of the month, only protected patches of snow were seen in the higher elevations. The settlements shook off the winter doldrums and came to life. The fields were prepared for planting and the lambing and calving pens were refurbished. The small tractors that had been salvaged from abandoned farms were tuned and ready for the plowing.

Bob Parker, in Beaver Valley, wanted to use the draft horses and a

metal plow to work the fields there. His answer to those who scoffed at the idea was, “We are going to run out of parts or fuel or something eventually and we will be back to plowing the old fashioned way, so we might as well get used to it.”

He admitted later that it was the most backbreaking job he had ever done, but he was getting the hang of it by the end. Luckily for him, the arable land in BeaverValley consisted of only a few acres.

Paul Ericson and Todd Spires, of the Second Rangers, found a honey tree while out on patrol, but were driven away by the bees when they tried to raid it. Pietro Rosaia had experience in bee keeping and built several box hives. He created beekeeper suits out of heavy canvass, wide brimmed hats and mosquito netting. He gave a hasty course in collecting bees and led several volunteers to the bee tree.

Once there, he placed the boxes around the tree, to provide a home when the hive swarmed. He inspected the tree and found a split near the base that was leaking honey. Using a homemade smoker, he was able to quiet the bees and scoop the honey into the miscellaneous containers they brought with them.

After they had gathered all the honey they could find, Pietro left a bucket propped against the tree to capture any more honey, like a sap bucket on a maple tree. Patrols in the area would pick it up and check the hives for a swarm.

When the extracted honey was introduced to the rest of the settlements, Gail O’Malley produced books by Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth, *The Hive and Honey-bee*, and Eva Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*, which were widely read by the amateur beekeepers.

Every patrol that went out kept watches for other hive trees and bee colonies.

Pietro tried to time a swarm. He and his apprentices made another series of boxes to place on top of the hive the swarm selected or were moved to. These supers would hold the racks on which the bees would build their honeycomb and store the hive's honey.

After constant monitoring, the hive swarmed and found one of the hive boxes Pietro had left. Since the bees were docile for the first day or two after a swarm, he was able to relocate the hive and the supers to BigValley.

The first planting was in the ground and the Rosaia found suitable sites on the hillside to start their vineyard. They had brought cuttings and root balls from California and had protected them over the previous winter.

The first patrol of the season revisited Julesburg and discovered brewery supplies. The Campbells were delighted and began plans to build a small brewery. At the end of the month, the beer had been brewed and bottled and was sitting in CougarCave to age. There were enough kits for fifty more batches and they were eager to have barley planted in anticipation of the last of the kits being brewed. They also wanted to find seeds for hops.

A train of five families arrived from California via the MormonTerritories. They reported that the Aztec Empire had started a spring offensive and were pushing up the length of California. They met stiff resistance between Redding/Yreka and Eureka and were stalled in the mountains there. The refugees were from the Weaverville area and had been cut off, so had fled east. The Mormons had taken them in and allowed them to stay for the winter.

The families were given, what was beginning to be called, The Governor's Speech. They were given their options, their duties, if they stayed

and community customs. They all opted to stay and the Singletons moved to BigValley, the rest settled in Mitchell. The One, Two and Four Troops were brought up to strength of nineteen and the Ten Troop was brought up to strength of twenty.

The winter damage to the reservoir and water system were repaired and several sections of pipe were buried below the frost line. The reservoir at BigValley was expanded to handle the influx of settlers and new lines were laid for a sewer system.

Ihio Masomoto, a herbalist, worked with the Medical Staff to identify plants with medicinal properties and teams were formed to search the hills. Gus and Linda Dove made detailed line drawings of the plants and copies were made for the patrols and search teams, which brought back supplies of the medicinal plants and samples of new ones.

An expedition was planned for May to the Mormon Settlements. There would be a cargo of cloth, leather, handicrafts, seeds, medicines and sixty head of cattle. Of course, salt was the target trade item, but finished leather goods, seeds, pottery and glass were also desirable. In addition, information about Oregon and Washington and possible trading partners in the Pacific Northwest was sought.

The Campbells said that any information about the production of hops or seeds would be received gratefully for their brewing operation. The Rosaias asked for any grape cuttings. The medical corps sent several copies of their Botanical Encyclopedia to the Mormon doctors.

The expedition was delayed until a deep scout along both flanks of the Rockies by the One Troop determined that the Aztecs were keeping their distance. The western patrol returned with no news of any invaders, but the

eastern patrol missed its return date and, by the middle of May, another patrol was planned to consist of the Two Troop, First Rangers and the Second Squad of the One Troop.

They had not been gone for more than two days when Will Smith of Two Troop came riding in with the news that the missing Squad had been located and were returning. They had found the Mills family and were escorting them in. He reported that they had sent a pigeon with the news. It had not made it and Zach, again, expressed his frustration over the lack of long-range communication.

The next afternoon, the three troops and the wagon arrived at the Gap. Zach and TJ rode down to meet them and greet the embarrassed Tim and his wife, Melinda, and their new daughter, Tina. While TJ took Tim's family to The Ranch, Zach took Tim to the Council to tell his story. For the short ride to Mitchell, Tim kept silent and brooded. Zach stopped trying to draw him out after two rebuffed attempts.

In the Council Chambers, William and the full Council were assembled for the first full meeting of the year. They received Tim and invited him to speak.

"As you might know, we left with Pastor Simmons over a year ago. We, and I apologize, thought like he did, that we should build a new country out of Christians. Well, not just Christians, but white Christians. Anyway, we went with him when he left for the east.

"Old Pete Dewinne and his wife died on the way, they were drowned in a river crossing. We spent two days praying for them and then kept going. I liked Paula and she and Melinda were close, but never mind that. We finally were found by some of the Soldiers of Christ and brought to New Jerusalem,

the old city of Springfield, Missouri. I got assigned to a farm outside of town and the Parson got tight with the Elders.

“Things weren’t too bad until I got assigned some workers. They were all blacks and there was an overseer and a couple of guards. I was told that my farm had been enlarged and these were the laborers. I saw right away that they weren’t hired hands, but slaves. When I told the Parson Simmons that I wasn’t comfortable with this, he told me that these men and women were under the protection of the church and they weren’t really made to be free.

“Mr. Smith, I kept thinking of Charlie and the rest here that were working with whites, Orientals and all and decided that I didn’t like what was going on. I wanted to leave, but Melinda was having a hard pregnancy and I just knew it would kill her to travel and in the middle of winter, too.

“Mr. Smith, you got to believe me. I didn’t let them to be whipped and I tried to make their lives easy as possible. When the baby came, I sent the guards some liquor and packed up the wagon. I freed the workers from the worker compound and told them to scatter, but some went after the guards and there was a fight. Me, I headed west. We kept to back roads. I had saved up some maps and we used them, like Mr. Zach did getting us to Mitchell.

“We finally got found by the Two Troop and came here. We are real grateful if you would let us come back and stay. I promise I won’t cause trouble and will work hard with TJ and the llamas.”

After he had finished, Zach asked him, “Have you heard anything about us?”

“Zach, we heard that Elder Crenshaw had, um, met with you and that you were going to help us wipe out the heathens, but that it would be awhile

until you were ready. Later, I talked with Parson Simmons and he said that you had been tainted and that, after the heathens were put to the sword, they would turn their attention to you.”

Carl Weisenfeld, who had been elected as a representative of Mitchell, asked, “Excuse me, Mr. Mills, but have you any word on the Israeli settlement in Florida?”

“Um, there was some talk about some Jews in Florida, but it wasn’t much. There was a fight, but they seemed to be holding the Soldiers of Christ off. Nothing was said about attacking them and I talked to a soldier in a bar once who said that they would be a tough nut to crack. Seems that, like here, everyone is in their army.”

Carl thanked him. No one else had any questions and they excused him, saying that he and his family would be informed about the Council’s decision. Zach called a trooper and asked him to escort Tim to The Ranch and assign him to the care of TJ.

When they had left, Zach returned to the Council Chamber. William broke off the discussion they were having on the opening of new areas and asked, “Zach, what is your opinion?”

“I always liked Tim and regretted his falling under Simmons’ sway. I think he is sincere and we can gain a good man for Jefferson and, maybe, get some intel on the Fundamentalists. I mean, we did get some good intel, already. He told us that the Fundys are going to hit the Mahdists first. Also, that the Israeli community is still standing, so whenever we can figure out how, we can assist Carl and any others who want to immigrate there to do so.”

He turned to the other members of the Council. “Tim is the kind of man who gives his loyalty completely. He gave it to Simmons until he saw

what was going on. I believe him, his kind make lousy liars. Unless we ever do something against his principles, like, like Devil worship, say, he will remain loyal to us.

“I am not saying that we don’t keep an eye on him for a while. Maybe, well, send him to BigValley to start up a llama herd there. TJ says that, with the number of pregnancies among the current herd, several females, their young and a young male can be sent there. We can create another weaving operation with all that entails.”

William looked around the room for any more discussion and Carl made the motion that they accept Tim, provisionally. It was seconded and carried by a voice vote. They also voted to start a second llama herd in BigValley and have Tim take charge of it.

Zach left immediately to inform the Mills of the Council’s decision. Both the Schummers and the Mills were relieved and Tim decided to leave the next day to look over the lie of the land and set up the BigValley operation. While he was gone, TJ would select the animals and equipment to send in the next week.

The expedition to Deseret was approved and the next several weeks were spent in selecting trade goods. Besides the normal items, Charlie Wright and Harvard O’Callaghan added decorative ironwork, Hans Silverstein put in a dozen copper bracelets, Jean Tourmond sent several small landscapes and others offered carvings, wooden toys and games.

Three wagons were loaded with trade goods and equipment and ready to set out. Four Troop was assigned the escort duty and they moved out on a bright April morning. They weren’t expected to return for several months and the eight pigeons included were expected to be released and bring news at key

points along the way.

After the excitement accompanying the expedition's departure, life settled back to normal. Several more marriages, births and, unfortunately, deaths broke the tedium of the workdays.

'Granny' Campbell died quietly in her sleep on April Fourteenth. Everyone mourned her. They would miss her humor and patience. She taught most of the children to knit and her infectious laughter and ability to tell jokes from the silly to the risqué would be sorely missed.

Pigeons arrived from the Four Troop with notes on their location. Everything seemed normal with the expedition, but the families were able to follow their movements and were reassured as to their safety.

There were several more incursions by small groups of Fundamentalists, but these were turned back. A large, mounted patrol from the Aztec Empire clashed with the Sioux and was driven off with heavy casualties. It was later intercepted on its homeward journey by the One Troop, which surprised them in camp and wiped them out. Peter Montgomery and Don Wright were severely wounded and Seth Williams was killed during the clash. The weapons, equipment, horses and usable clothing were brought back to Mitchell.

Seth's name was carved on the memorial and a service was held in Mitchell. The bagpipers played 'Amazing Grace' and the reality of the dangers they faced was reinforced upon the settlers.

Spring was drawing to a close when the Deseret expedition returned. Their families greeted the dusty riders and eager hands took over driving the wagons to the Commissary. Zach caught up with Kim Allen at the water trough and expressed surprise to him that they hadn't brought back any other

refugees.

“Things have changed, Zach,” Kim said, combing his damp hair with his fingers before settling his hat back on his head. “The Aztec’s have been stopped and thrown back by the Bear Flaggers. That’s some name they got from an early state or something from the 1800s. They heard about Jefferson from the Mormons and organized themselves into a Republic, the BearFlagRepublic, actually. They formed an army and, with the help of the Mormons, knocked the stuffing out of the Aztec forces.

“Oregon created a state, too. Well, two of them. One if based in the old capitol of Salem and the other is based in Ashland, and is called Monroe. They are talking about treaties between the three Republics and Deseret for mutual defense. They are also talking to representatives of the Republic of Washington, based in Longmont and the State of Columbia, based near Pullman, though those two are not on real friendly terms, from what I understand.

“We met a lot of traders in Deseret. We got a source of hops for the Campbells, from Oregon and we picked up some grape vines for the Rosaiaas from Columbia.”

Zach interrupted him to call for William and Carl to join them. He had Kim repeat what he had said and William insisted on calling a Town Meeting, including the valley settlements.

The meeting was held in the early afternoon to allow time for those who wanted to attend to travel to and from their homes in daylight. The Council Chambers were full to overflowing, with the problem being exacerbated with the construction going on to enlarge the room. William was sweating profusely by the time he was able to gavel the meeting to order. He

wiped his broad face and addressed the audience.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the trading expedition has returned and, as most of you know, has momentous news. Kim, please, come on up here and give your official report.”

Kim rose from his seat on the dais and approached the podium. He reiterated his report on the expedition, enumerating the salt, pottery, glass and leather goods they have acquired. The demand for leather, cloth, woodworking and ironwork was high. It seems that the jewelry and some of the toys were much admired, but considered luxury items and didn't bring the goods in trade that had been anticipated.

He finished by reporting on what he had learned about the political situation on the West Coast. There were several questions from the members of the audience who had come from California, chased out by the Aztecs.

When the question and answer period was finished, the governor took the stage, again. “People, this is both good news and bad. We are happy that the people out there have been able to stop the Aztec Empire and are starting to form working governments. This could be the first step in a reconstituted United States.

“On the other side, the two organizations in old WashingtonState have had clashes over borders, resources and just the old divide between the two sides of the Cascades. We, at least I, don't want to form into small states like Europe and fight interminable wars.

“Therefore, I would propose that we send a message to the governments of each of these bodies and suggest that delegations be formed to meet and get to know each other. Do I have a motion from the Council?”

The motion was made and seconded and a message was to be sent to

the various governments. The proposal was to meet in Monroe, as it was centrally located.

Three troopers from the First Rangers were detached as messengers under the leadership of Harry McGregor. They packed supplies and set out the next morning. They decided against taking pigeons because of the distance and their unreliability. When they got to Deseret, they would release one of the two pigeons Kim had left to let Mitchell know they had arrived, and another when they returned there and were on their way back to Jefferson.

The spring saw the fields turn green with young crops. It seemed as if the earth wanted to burst out of its winter cocoon and plants seemed to shoot out of the ground. The lambing had shown a marked increase in the herds with double and triple births. The calves were inspected for defects and, there were so many new calves that, even small imperfections were deemed enough to condemn them to slaughter. TJ saw a healthy increase in the llama herds and declared that some of the older animals would be slaughtered for winter.

After the lambing had been complete, the shearing of the sheep began. Darius Ngunye, Billy and Edward Zales and Michael Pacheski formed the core team and they each took an apprentice to learn the trade. Adolph Reiter bragged that he had it easiest since he was helping Billy Zales.

“I won’t have to work too hard to keep up with the old man,” he confided to the other apprentices.

As it turned out, Billy was what was known in the trade as a ‘gun shearer’ and could shear 200 sheep in a day. By the end of the week Adolph was exhausted and fell onto his bed every night, swearing he never wanted to see another sheep as long as he lived.

After the wool was cleaned on the table top and trimmed, it was baled

and stored for the carding, spinning and weaving operations. Scraps which were deemed unworthy of being made into cloth were set aside. These pieces would be cleaned and used for medical wadding, wound pack and other miscellaneous uses. Several of the artists wanted some for their projects. The apprentices were more than happy to resume their duties with their troops and Adolph refused any form of lamb or mutton for the next several months.

Grace O'Malley was trying to refine a cheese making operation. She had discovered several books, which detailed the making of cheese. So far she had been able to make a type of yoghurt and ricotta cheese, thanks to help from Emmerson Johnson, the chemist from the west coast. She was determined to make hard cheeses in order to preserve the sheep, goat, bovine and llama milk that she felt was being wasted because of its short shelf life.

The arrival of a pigeon showed that the messengers had arrived in Deseret safely.

A second sawmill had been built in BigValley and boards from the original mill had finally dried and become usable, but the salvaging of abandoned houses continued. Several times the salvage crews had skirmishes with reiver gangs or groups which had degenerated to the level of wild animals, using rocks and clubs for weapons. Though several troopers had been injured during these skirmishes, no one was seriously hurt or killed.

A second pigeon arrived and two weeks later the messengers returned and life settled down to the usual rounds of work, school, sporting events between troops or settlements and the monthly community picnics and games. The Council had decided that there needed to be regular interruptions of routine to keep the settlers from getting stale.

The thirty-two births in the summer months led to the usual

jokes about hard winters and nothing to do. Father Tillford and the reverends Hind and Tobias were kept busy with the christenings.

Chapter 30

Long Range Scout

Spring/Summer of 2043

A Boy!!! I'm a dad. Kind of feels good.

We are becoming a thriving community, now. We have bees, so sweets won't be a problem. Now, if only we had coffee to sweeten, I would be really happy. The lumber mills are going to save us a lot of effort and save us from having to salvage abandoned buildings for lumber, though we will still need windows, doors, hardware, cabinets and fixtures. Deseret is working on a way to make window glass in sheets, but there is still plenty of salvageable glass.

The news of the organization among survivors on the west coast is heartening. Though I am glad they whipped the Aztecs that may drive the Aztecs to attack us. We are the most vulnerable of the small states in the west. The Aztecs have to get through the Flaggers before they can hit the Oregon States and that would leave their flank vulnerable to Deseret. Our only allies, the Sioux, are chancy, at best, and only if Two Wolves is in charge. I will propose to the Defense Committee another, longer patrol to the south. Possibly, even to the border of Old Mexico. They would be gone for several months. We have been getting a lot of flack from the newcomers, who haven't witnessed the Mahdist attacks, about sending their sons on these long expeditions. They understand the one to Deseret. After all, that is for trade,

to make life better for both peoples.

What they don't understand is: the Mahdists or Aztecs, even the Fundamentalists, wouldn't hesitate to attack us if they thought they could get away with it. We are an island in a very hostile sea. The boys don't mind. Until they get bloodied, it is all a big game to them. They get out of the mundane chores when they are on patrol. I will have to talk with Ed and Carl about how to get the older folks on board.

The meeting looks like it is going to go forward. The pigeons have brought back the news that only the State of Columbia hasn't been contacted. We have to make a decision on who to send to the meeting with the other states and see if we can make some progress on getting a national government organized. We just can't let it get out of control like last time. Anyway, we will have a Council Meeting about this in the next couple of days.

The Defense Committee met to discuss the next patrol towards the Aztec Empire. Carl and Ed recommended that the Rangers take this patrol. One troop would move down the west side of the Rockies and another would move down the east side. By going on foot, the trip would be slower, but the Rangers would be able to keep to the hills. Jimmy Pinder and Zach argued that the patrol would take six to eight weeks on foot and if they met trouble, they wouldn't be able to escape.

Harry McGregor turned his milky eye on the two and insisted, "The Rangers should be able to detect any danger before it happens and avoid it. Their training is not, primarily, as a fighting force, though they can do that well enough. They are a recon detachment. They will have the numbers to

fight, yes, but they will also have the skills to avoid a fight.”

Hans’ biggest concern was that sending two Ranger detachments would strip Jefferson of its woodsmen. When Zach suggested that only one Ranger Troop be sent, split like the last Ranger patrol, he was opposed by Carl.

“With the length of the scout, they were better off with a full troop. The length of time and the unknown problems they would face suggests that the full ten men would be better.”

“Why?” Zach countered.

“Ten men can put up a better defense over five. If there were an accident, four others could carry the injured man and there would still be sufficient rangers remaining to provide cover and relief. I don’t know, but I just don’t see sending a half-troop on an extended patrol,” Carl finished.

“All right, Carl,” Zach said, holding his hands up in surrender. “I see your point. That still leaves the question of having too few scouts to keep track of the Fundys. What do you propose about that?”

Carl looked at Ed, who nodded. “Ed and I have been uncomfortable with just having three small troops of Rangers. We have been discussing the possibility of having cross training. To start with, we would rotate One Troop into the scouts. We could rotate in two or three at a time and they could be trained with the current rangers.

“When they have gained proficiency, on both sides, we rotate others in. That would give us the nucleus of a new Ranger Troop, when we get more recruits or younger boys join the Mounted Infantry.”

Harry asked, “How long is all of this going to take, Carl?”

“The training program is fairly rigorous,” Carl answered. “The current

rangers trained for six months. Hand-to-hand fighting, woods craft, survival techniques, archery on both the bow and crossbow, weapons training on the M25 and physical training.”

Zach shook his head and spoke. “We don’t have six months, do we? Well, we may have six years, for all we know, but we need to find out if there are any signs of an attack soon. We will be pretty safe, if we have another hellish winter like last year, but they could attack during a mild winter.”

“Zach, we can start the program and give them the basics in a month. Then, the few who are with the patrol, can take training in the field. The others would continue their training as they run patrols around Jefferson.”

Zach turned to Ed. “And both of you are all right with this?”

Ed nodded his agreement, stoking his pipe and sending a fresh cloud of smoke into the air. They were meeting outside the barracks just so Ed could indulge his habit

Hans called for a vote and the committee, some reluctantly, agreed to the plan. The expedition would start out in five weeks. Ed, Carl and Harry were authorized to select the recruits for the rangers from One Troop and begin training.

That evening, the Council decided to send a half-troop to the Meeting in Monroe. Grady O’Malley, a State Representative from California, was named the leader. He was supported by Robert Agnello and Dylan Johnson, were lawyers; Wade Bronski, a financial expert; Mitchell Diggs, the mayor of the town of Sandburg, Ohio and Carl Smythe, as the military expert. Wade was the trade delegate. He was to determine the needs from each area and forge trade agreements, if possible.

Two Troop’s first squad was to act as their escort. The expedition

would leave in a week with several wagons of supplies and trade goods. They would join with the delegation from Deseret and travel to Monroe together.

At the last minute, Esther Diggs and Marge Agnello decided they wanted to go and the Council okayed their inclusion, though there was some speculation on whether they had any say in the matter. Evelyn Bronski decided she would go, also, as did Mina Johnson and an additional wagon was needed for supplies and camping equipment. They had a dozen pigeons with them.

The new ranger class was started and plans were made and personnel assigned for the extended patrol. Ed, Carl and Harry were pleased with the progress of the recruits in their first week and were confident that the patrol could leave on schedule.

The time came for the patrols to set out and the Council asked Zach to tag along as advisor to the western patrol. He refused, at first, but Sarah, who was near her due date, insisted. She told him that the Rangers needed him, although she remembered how he acted before William was born and she didn't want him to repeat his hovering behavior.

There had been a week of summer storms before they left. Each Ranger Troop was made up of veterans and trainees. All were armed with M-25s, a SigSauer 9mm pistol, a bow or crossbow, several throwing knives, MREs and 300 rounds of ammunition. In addition, each man carried one half of a tent, a sleeping bag, two changes of clothing and an item of camp gear. Zach carried his sniper rifle, rather than a bow or crossbow.

After he said good-by to Sarah and asked, for the twentieth time for 'Doc' to look after her, he signaled the troop to take the road to the Back Door. They passed through the guards and disappeared from sight down the

trail to the south.

The first day they took it easy. Zach let Tim Tobias set the pace and organize the march. This was ground they had gone over many times during training. When they reached the end of the territory claimed by Jefferson, Tim called a halt.

They set up a cold camp and ate their meal. Tim met with the squad leaders and assigned duties. He wanted to make a couple of night marches. He reasoned that an invasion force would be more easily spotted at night when there were campfires. He woke them after dark and they geared up, ready to travel in ten minutes. Two men set out as point, with the main body following after letting them get a five-minute head start. Two flankers were out and a single trooper brought up the rear.

The first night was uneventful and camp was made up a small canyon in a grove of trees. There was a clear, cold brook running along the floor of the canyon. Tim ordered two troopers as lookouts, perched on the shoulder of the mountain. The rest of the rangers set up camp and made a hot meal, keeping their fires small and concealed.

After breakfast, replacements were sent out to relieve the lookouts, who came in and ate. Michael O'Malley and Bernd Silverstein scouted the plain for signs of recent travel, but returned later in the morning with nothing to report. "If there had been someone through here, it would have been obvious, with all the rain we been havin'," reported Mike.

At dusk, the party was roused and they began their march southwest, skirting the mountain, but keeping to the foothills and under cover as much as possible. Just after sunrise, Zach killed a small deer drinking at a stream. The carcass was quickly dressed, the entrails and hide buried deep and two small

fires were used to cook some of the meat, while the rest had been cut into strips and was drying on racks over the flames. Sentries were assigned, camp was set up and the meal was eaten.

After a quiet day, one of the sentries aroused the camp and they ate a hasty breakfast. They broke camp with a minimum of fuss, burying the bones, racks and fires, scattering branches, dirt and leaves over the site.

One of the rangers on lookout the day before thought he saw smoke to the south, but it was either his imagination or hidden against the low clouds gathering in that direction. They advanced with greater care for the rest of the night, frequently sending out two men to scout the way. Zach had a private talk with Tim during the march. He was fretting that their progress was too slow. Every night they had to wait for the moon and soon it would start to wane and they would be going even slower.

Tim reluctantly agreed, "I've been thinking about that, too." They halted early that night and started out at noon for another short march. From that point on, they marched during the day.

The days took on a sameness over the next two weeks. It rained on several occasions and Tim called for an early camp on those days, due to the limited visibility. At the end of the second week, Josh Blaine, who was one of the point men, came hurrying back with the news that they had spotted a small ranch tucked into the shoulder of the mountain. There was no smoke or signs of life around the buildings.

Tim led the patrol forward and spread the rangers in a defensive position. He and Zach studied the buildings for a few minutes, looking for signs of life or recent activity. The house was a two-storey frame building with peeling white paint at the end of a large cove. They couldn't see any

broken windows on the front or the side facing them. The barn had a sagging door, but no other sign of neglect. The door was half open and there was sufficient room to get a horse or small vehicle through the opening. The hayloft door was closed. The three outbuildings were of metal, with rust where the enamel had chipped or flaked, showing long streaks of red.

“Well, Tim, what do you want to do?” asked Zach, still studying the layout.

“There’s a ridge on the other side of the cove,” answered Tim. “I’m going to lead three men over there to look at the other side and back of the buildings. If I don’t see anything, I’ll signal you and you can take four men to check it out.”

“Good.”

Tim began his swing around the ranch buildings and Zach had a hard time tracking him and his men, even with binoculars. He smiled his approval at the careful way the rangers used the available cover and always had two rifles ready to fire. They kept a watch up the mountainside as they moved to assure that there were no surprises coming at them from that direction. Several times Tim stopped and did a slow inspection of the ranch. Finally, he reached the ridge and spent ten minutes inspecting the buildings before looking at Zach and nodding.

Zach took Don Williams, Tim Scales, Gary Christensen and Ed McWhorter with him and slowly advanced down the hillside, two men moving and three covering them. They reached the cove floor and spread out in a skirmish line. As they advanced on the buildings, they continued to have two men move while three crouched or stood behind cover and trained their weapons on the buildings. They carried only their rifles and pistols, having

left the rest of their equipment on the ridge.

Zach reached the porch, sprinted up the stairs and crashed through the front door. Tim and Gary covered the corners of the house and Don and Ed followed Zach through the door. Ed immediately returned and vomited over the railing. Zach and Don exited the house, pale and ill looking.

“Clear,” croaked Zach. He took a deep breath, nudged Ed with his rifle’s muzzle and nodded towards the barn. A search of the rest of the premises revealed that there was no one on the ranch. Zach signaled to Tim that it was clear and Tim and two rangers descended to meet Zach and his team at the front porch. The other rangers took up defensive positions on the ridges, keeping watch over the cove and the rolling prairie beyond.

“You aren’t going to want to go in there, Tim,” Zach said, placing a hand on the young man’s shoulder as he started up the steps.

“What?” queried Tim. “What’s wrong?”

“The family that was living here is in there. It looks like rievvers got here first. They’ve been dead a long time, but they died hard. Looks like whoever did this enjoyed torture.”

“How, how many?” asked Josh Blaine.

“Six. Three adults and three children.”

“Children? Did he torture the kids, too?” interrupted Gary.

“He. They. Whoever did it, did the kids, too.” Zach turned to Peter Armindez and Tim Scales. “See if you can find shovels in the shed.”

By the time the dead had been buried and the buildings thoroughly searched, night had fallen. Tim recalled the sentries on the hill and posted two guards at the mouth of the cove. The rest of the party ate a quiet meal and lay down, some on beds and other on couches. Two were in the barn,

bedded down in the hayloft.

Morning brought more rain and Tim decided to remain an extra day at the ranch. Ed found an old washtub and a glass washboard. The rangers' spirits were raised by the exercise of washing their clothes the "old-fashioned way", as Todd put it. There was a clothesline in the basement. While hanging up his wet clothing, Ed noticed an odd shadow in one corner of the room.

He investigated and found a concealed door partially hidden by a set of shelves. He used his combat knife and managed to snap the lock. The door swung open to reveal a short tunnel. Ed hurried up the stairs and apprised the others with his discovery.

Tim grabbed a lantern and led the way downstairs. The tunnel was narrow and Tim, due to the breadth of his shoulders was forced to turn sideways. He had his pistol in his hand and Gary, who followed, held the lantern as high as he could. The damp, earthy smell reminded him of the graves they dug the day before. The tunnel curved slightly then rose in a series of long, broad earthen steps and ended in a trapdoor.

"I would bet we are under the barn," Tim whispered, then realized what he was doing and added in a normal voice, "hold the light up a little, I'm looking for a latch or handle."

He found the bolt holding the door closed, released it and pushed. There was a cascade of dirt and Tim cursed at the dust in his eyes. He stumbled up the short set of wooden steps and cracked his head on a low beam. He saw stars and fell to his knees from the sharp pain. He waved off Gary's helping hand and stood, gingerly feeling above his head for obstructions.

The two found themselves in a long, narrow room with shelves at the each end and a series of cross pieces with boxes laid across them. Tim ordered the rest of the rangers to stop pushing to get in and wait while he and Gary looked the place over.

The shelves in front of them were well built of two-by-fours and plywood. They looked surprisingly sturdy for the size of the wooden boxes sitting on them. Gary shone the light in one and they saw small rocks. Others held small sacks of, what looked like, sand, ranging from fine to coarse.

Suddenly, the boys looked at each other and said together, "Gold!"

Tim tucked a handful of rocks in his pants pocket and a small sack in each of his shirt pockets. He turned his attention to the rafters and pulled down one of the long cardboard boxes lying there. The box nearly fell apart, even with tender handling, and they discovered that the box contained a lever-action rifle wrapped in oiled cloth. Investigating several more boxes, they found more weapons of various types, but all vintage models. They passed three down to waiting hands and moved to investigate the shelves at the other end of the room.

These were lighter metal shelving. They contained boxes of ammunition for the weapons and a logbook. Gary took several boxes of the shells and Tim picked up the log. They returned to the stairs and ordered the rangers still remaining to back up and return to the basement.

By the time they got back to the kitchen of the ranch house, they were dirty and covered with cobwebs. They crowded around the table where the log, weapons, shells, rocks and sacks were piled. The weapons consisted of a Sharps .50 buffalo gun, a Winchester model '73 and a Colt double-barreled shotgun. All them were in mint condition. The shells were .30-06, .44/40 and

OO buck shotgun shells.

“I have no idea what gold looks like, but I can’t imagine why this stuff would be hidden, if it wasn’t,” observed Zach.

“Are we rich?” eagerly asked Tim Scales.

“If this is gold,” Zach answered, “we are rich as Midas. Of course, that is gauged on twenty years ago when gold was a medium of exchange. However, in today’s world, this stuff is only valuable to Bernd’s father to make trinkets with.”

Tim looked crestfallen and was given the nickname of ‘Midas’ from that day on.

Zach took the logbook and opened it to the first page. It was inscribed with the name ‘Peter Allen Quail’ and the date ‘June 23, 1978 – ‘. The first several pages were covered in lists of guns, giving the make, model, caliber, purchase price and, for some, the sales price and several dates. The list also included knives, swords, sabers and cutlasses. When he got to the end of the writing, Zach idly flipped through the remaining pages and discovered more writing. He flipped the book over and opened the back cover.

On the first several pages were crudely drawn maps of different scales. The first one was the cove where the ranch stood and there was an ‘X’ at the back of the cove. The next one showed a trail from the ‘X’ to another trail or stream. The last one showed a series of ‘X’s along the trail or stream and a cave.

Flipping through the next few pages, Zach saw a list of dates, weights and a number code. The totals showed that there was nearly a hundred pounds of gold. Zach laughed and said, “That’s nearly four million dollars

worth, back a few years.”

“According to this,” he continued, tapping the log, “there are thirteen long guns and five short guns of various ages and calibers, along with nearly a thousand rounds of ammunition, also of various calibers. They don’t compare with what we are carrying today, so we will leave them here. If we have time and can find a wagon or truck, we’ll pick them up on our way back. There are twenty-seven swords and knives, too.

“The last entry was several years ago, so the ones we found probably didn’t know about the hidey-hole, not that it would have done them any good. I imagine that the bastards would have killed them anyway.

“Tim, did you or Gary see a door into the barn from the hidey-hole?”

“Well,” Tim replied, looking embarrassed, “we really didn’t think about it.”

“Did you figure out what part of the barn you were in?”

“Um, well, we were concentrating on the stuff and not on anything else. Sorry. We didn’t even think to look.”

Zach chuckled, “Gold can affect you that way. When you return this stuff, look around and see what you can find. Now, the bunch of you smells like an open grave, get out of those clothes and get them washed.”

It took two days for the rain to let up. By that time they were all tired of dried foods and Zach okayed a hunt, after a thorough scout was done on the plains and in the mountain. Only bows were to be used.

As the sun dropped below the cloud cover, the hunting party returned carrying a wounded Michael O’Malley and the carcasses of several young pigs. While Josh was working on his wound, Tim Scales told what happened.

“We were walking through some brush along a game trail and we

heard a noise at the other side of the brushy area where the trees started again. Michael had the big crossbow and set himself in the trail, while Pete and I flanked him. Before we knew it, a huge hog came running down the path and hooked Mike. We all got off one shot, I don't think I hit him, but the other two did. We checked on Mike and heard the rest of the party yelling something.

"We got the bleeding stopped and were carrying Mike when the rest came up. They had shot a couple of young pigs and nearly got run down by the hog that got Mike. They killed the big pig and left it, because it was too heavy to carry.

"Well, then we came back here," he finished lamely.

Zach and Tim Tobias thanked him and went up to the bedroom where Mike was sleeping. Josh put a finger to his lips and led them out of the room, closing the door behind them.

"He lost a lot of blood, but that thing missed anything important. A couple of inches up and to the left and there wouldn't be any little Mikes running around. He needs a couple of days rest and he needs to stay off that leg for a week."

"Crap!" said Zach.

"Can he be carried on a litter?" asks Tim.

"Eventually," replied Josh. "He needs, at least, two days in bed to see if he develops a fever. If that happens, he can't be moved until it breaks and then he will be really weak."

"Zach, can we detach men to take him back and have the rest carry on?" asked Tim.

"We are under orders to stay together. The original plan was for a

large enough force to handle problems like this. What would happen if we split up and a week later I break a leg? We would be twice as far from help and would have no protection while I get a free ride. No, we have to stick together.

“I think we should wait the two days, Josh. It will, then, be your decision as to whether to go on or return to Jefferson. Until then, we send out three-man parties to explore the area and keep a watch on the plains.”

The next two days brought clearer weather and the sentries at the mouth of the cove were able to keep an eye out for movement. An additional post was established in a small rise several miles southwest of the ranch. A regular rotation was kept, with the men rarely using the same path regularly to avoid ambushes or leaving a well-defined trail.

On the third day, Josh declared that Mike didn't have a fever and could travel. Zach had rigged two litters, one to carry Mike and the other to carry the equipment of those assigned to be stretchermen.

They set out in the early afternoon and set up camp early in a grove of trees fed by a stream out of the mountains. Even with constant rotation, the rangers gladly made camp and rested.

The next day, they started at first light. Pete and Tim Tobias swung wide on the plain to look for tracks or other signs. The noon break was stretched to help the stretcher-bearers recover. Tim Scales and Bernd Silverstein took point and the rest, with flankers and a rear guard followed their lead.

The sky had cleared and it turned into a hot, sunny day. Zach ordered frequent rests and had Josh pass out salt tablets. By the time they were ready to stop for the night, the rangers were close to exhaustion. They had only

made fifteen miles that day and Zach was worried that they wouldn't be able to scout as far south as they wanted. That night, Mike was able to take a few steps with the aid of a crutch Pete carved out of a fallen branch.

During supper, Tim Tobias approached Zach with the news that Tim Scales and Bernd hadn't returned. Zach stepped away from camp, taking Tim with him. They discussed the worst-case scenario that the two had been captured and the mission compromised. He ordered the fire doused and half the men were to be on sentry duty at a time. They moved camp a mile farther on and settled down among some rocks on a knoll that offered a clear field of fire and a ready escape through a shallow gully.

After a tense night, the sun rose on the knoll and every ranger had taken a position. A little after dawn, Tim Scales and Bernd were seen following their tracks from the previous night's first camp. The two were greeted with slaps on the back and questions about where they had been.

Laughing, Tim said they had just out-traveled the rest of the party, decided to spend the night where they found themselves at nightfall and chided them for being slow.

"You think its funny, Tim? You think that our moving camp in the dark is just hilarious? You think that our being on high alert and not getting much sleep is wildly comical?

"Well, I don't think it is so funny or amusing or comical. You got too far ahead of us or we were too slow. Doesn't matter. You and Bernd were the point. How can you be an effective point if you lose contact?" Zach finished with the rhetorical question.

He turned and addressed the rest of the subdued rangers. "This is not a game, gentlemen. The best we can expect from the Aztecs is slavery. If

they get to Jefferson undetected, you and I will lose everything we have built. No, gentlemen, this is not a game and I want you to stop looking on it as one. Get ready to move out.

“Tobias, set the point, but not Scales or Silverstein. They carry a litter today, all day.”

The patrol set out, quiet with a new air of seriousness. Many of the men had looked on the patrol as a lark, but Zach’s words brought the matter into a new light. There was less joking around during that day and the point was waiting at a camp site at dusk. They reported that they thought they spotted a column of smoke to the south, but they weren’t sure, because of the setting sun.

Tim Tobias climbed a spur of the mountain and swept the plains. He stared hard to the southwest for a few minutes and climbed down.

He gathered the rangers around him. “There’s a light to the south. Looks like a big fire. Could be a bunch of fires close together to look that big, but I couldn’t tell. I figure it is about two miles off.” Drawing in the dirt, he continued, “It looks like this arroyo cuts in the right direction. Scales, I want you to take five men and travel south until you pass them and cut in behind, if you can find some cover. I’ll take the rest, move down the arroyo and, if they move north, we will see them and find out who they are. You keep behind them, but don’t get spotted.

“We will start out at 2:00 a.m.”

“What about Mike?” Zach asked, throwing Tim into confusion.

“I’ll be all right, Zach,” said Mike.

Tim shook his head. “Boy. Well, Josh, you stay here with Mike. We will leave you enough supplies for a few days, but we’ll be back for you

before then. As soon as we figure out what this means, we will come back. Okay?”

Josh nodded and Mike looked angry.

They had another cold meal and lay down for a few hours. At 2:00 a.m., Tim went through camp shaking the men to wakefulness. They policed the camp and stacked their equipment, except for weapons, ammunition, water and rations. Tim Scales and his five men started south, while Tim Tobias and the rest of the rangers moved down the arroyo.

By sunup, both groups were in position. The southerly squad had kept up a grueling pace to reach their destination in time. The northerly squad found that the arroyo wended north and they followed it as far west as they could. Leaving it, they scattered and began a cautious advance towards a small rise, surrounded by brush and a few scraggly trees. Once they reached their destination, Zach crawled to the top of the rise and, concealed next to a large rock, scanned the plain. He saw dust to the south with occasional glints of metal shining through.

The rangers took turns keeping an eye on the moving party. Finally, they could make out trucks and mounted men. It was difficult to count, but Tim estimated that there were no more than fifty riders and whoever was in the five trucks, if anybody was actually riding in them. The uniforms were reminiscent of the Aztecs.

“That’s too many to attack, even for Rangers,” said Zach, drawing grins from the grimy faces surrounding him. Let’s say that there are another two hundred in the trucks. That only gives them about two hundred and fifty. Either they are on a patrol, which I doubt with those numbers, even with the trucks empty; or they are on a trading mission; it can’t be an invasion, we or

the Sioux outnumber them.”

“Could this be an advance guard?” asked Peter.

“Could be, but why bring that many trucks? None of this really makes sense, except trade. That brings us back to the question of ‘trade with whom?’”

“About the only thing to do, then, is follow them,” offered Tim.

Zach agreed and they kept them in sight until the dust cloud obscured the trucks. He noticed that there was very little attempt at security. There was no point, no flankers and no rear-guard. The whole operation made him nervous and he stayed where they were until they spotted the southern squad and were reunited with them.

Tim ordered Tim Scales and his rangers back to the camp. They were to pick up Mike and Josh and the equipment and move north along the mountain range. The rest would keep the Aztecs in sight and try to find out what they were up to.

They followed them for the rest of the day, utilizing the arroyo to keep out of sight. When the Aztecs set up camp for the night, Peter Armindez offered to sneak up on them and try to overhear something. At first, Zach and Tim were opposed, but finally acceded, cautioning him to be careful.

Zach was on watch when he heard a small scuffling sound. Out of the darkness Peter whispered the password and Zach told him to come in. The small ranger slithered over the lip of the arroyo and they went to find Tim. Peter reported that he had been able to get close to the camp and expressed contempt for the lack of security. “I could have killed the sentry, he was asleep,” he said.

“I was able to sneak up behind the biggest tent. I figured that it was

the leader's tent. They didn't even clear the brush around it, so I was able to get next to it. There were a couple of men sitting at the table. I was able to see when I cut a small hold in the canvass.

"They were drinking tequila or mescal or something and talking about home and some woman they both knew. Finally, they mentioned that they were heading towards the Sioux.

"Oh, yeah, the trucks are full of stuff for the Sioux. They are talking about making a treaty with them so they'll attack Deseret from the east while the Aztecs hit it from the south. One of them mentioned Black Moon and helping him take control of the Sioux Confederation.

"The younger officer didn't think it would work and said some pretty insulting things about Indians in general. The younger officer left soon after and the old guy went to bed, so I high-tailed it back here."

"Zach, what do you think we should do?" asked Tim Tobias, aware that this was beyond him.

"Two runners. Strip them of all but the barest necessities. Send them back to Jefferson to warn them of what is happening. Have them send One and Four Troops, with half of the Militia and A Troop in support. At the rate they are going, we can hit them near where we first saw them after the cattle drive.

"Tim, you and three others will continue to follow them and send a runner if something happens that would cause a change in plans. The rest of us will get Mike and Josh and head back to the ranch. We will wait there. Have the runners send horses and a light wagon or truck for Mike.

"Now, who are the fastest runners?"

"Pete and Gary. They should be able to get there in a couple of

days.” Tim replied.

“All right, you two. Strip off your gear. Take two canteens each, a handgun each and a supply of those power bars. I want you in Jefferson, alive, day after tomorrow. That should give you time to alert the settlements, get troops on the way and set up the ambush.

“Tell Ed or Carl not to destroy the wagons, they may have stuff we can use in them. Take off”

The two runners followed the arroyo north and quickly passed out of sight. Tim Tobias kept Tim Scales, Todd Spires and Ed McWhorter with him and Zach took the others to pick up Mike and Josh.

Zach and his squad, carrying Mike and what equipment they could manage, reached the ranch house two days later. Mike was able to hobble with the help of his crutch.

When they had determined that the ranch had not been disturbed since they left it, Zach settled the others in and took Bernd and Don Williams back to salvage the equipment they had left behind.

When they returned, they found a squad of B Troop waiting for them with mounts and a pickup truck with a canopy. The antique weapons and ammunition and the boxes and sacks of gold had already been loaded. Mattresses from the house were stacked on top of the loads and within fifteen minutes the cavalcade was mounted and headed north.

Jenny Washington filled Zach in on the news from Jefferson. She congratulated him on his new son. “It’s a boy and Sarah is fine,” she told him then went on to tell him that four troops had started out immediately after Pete and Gary had arrived nearly exhausted from their run. Harry McGregor was leading the intercepting force and all of the settlements had been put on high

alert. Runners had been dispatched south, along the eastern border of the Rockies to recall First Rangers.

When she was finished, all Zach could say was, “She’s all right.”

After he had recovered from the shock of the news, Zach nodded his approval and impatiently thought of the distance they had to travel to reach the settlements. They arrived at Jefferson on the third day after leaving the ranch and were greeted by members of the Militia at the Back Door. Zach left the troop in Tim’s care and rode to the Command Post. Ed met him at the door and reiterated what Jenny had told him and that they had a messenger who reported that the ambush was a complete success.

They had trapped the convoy in a small defile and they would have surrendered if one of them hadn’t decided to put up a fight. They got several shots off before most of them had been killed or wounded by overlapping machine gun fire. Of the fifty men escorting the wagon, thirty-seven had been killed and the rest wounded, four severely. ‘Doc’ White and the medical team were bringing in twelve prisoners. Zach cursed the poor communications, not for the first time, as he hurried home to see his family.

Chapter 31

Meetings

Summer of 2043

We caught a break on this one. I don't know how bad it would have been if the Empire had managed to make an alliance with Black Moon. I can imagine, however.

Again, we managed to get out of a fight with barely a scratch. We have incredible luck, Matt set his ambush brilliantly, the enemy underestimated us or all three. Of course, if the enemy stops underestimating us or gets a commander not related to someone, we could face a lot stiffer opposition.

'Doc' is bringing in the prisoners and we will have to interrogate them. He had better not stay around since it could get messy. I don't enjoy intimidation. It doesn't necessarily get accurate information and it can divide the community. Well, we will find out tomorrow when the prisoners come in. Maybe, they will just be too happy to give us the information we want.

We will have to send a messenger to Two Wolves and let him know what Black Moon is up to. I wish Two Wolves would just shoot him and get it over with.

I am a father, again. It happened the day after we left. Sarah's water broke and our second son was born within the hour. I knew I should have stayed and helped. Well, we named him after our fathers, Charles Mason. Unlike William, he's a squaller.

We received a pigeon today from the delegation. They reached Deseret and left the next day for Monroe with the contingent from Deseret. I am going to propose to the Council that we send messengers to Deseret to let them know what kind of plans the Empire and Black Moon had, and may still have, for them. They will have to beef up their forces on their southern border, at least for a while.

Well, I had better get some sleep; there are several marriages tomorrow. Pretty soon there won't be a single woman left in Jefferson. Sarah takes pride in being a matchmaker. Reminds me of the punch line to an old joke, a married woman just has to make sure the rest are miserable, too. Not that I am foolish enough to say that to Sarah, especially now that the boys aren't sleeping well.

The next day Matt led the victorious troops, prisoners and loot to the Mound. The wagons were sent to the commissary and inventoried. There were several cases of older M16 rifles and two cases of ammunition. A surprising find was a small chest of silver coins with an eagle with a snake in its claws on one side and the profile of the emperor of the Aztecs on the other. This, like the gold brought back from the abandoned ranch, was given to Hans Silverstein, the jeweler, and Stewart Silver, the dentist. Bolts of cotton cloth, bales of marijuana and sacks of green coffee beans were included.

Zach's mouth watered at the sight of real coffee. Sarah laughed as he patted the sacks. "Don't get greedy, you coffee hound," she said. "Others want it as much as you do, you know."

“I don’t know what you are talking about, lady,” he answered with a dignified air and picked up William, took her arm and escorted her and Charles towards hotel. He kissed her and rode to the hospital.

The wounded had been taken there under guard. The highest-ranking survivor was a scared looking sergeant with a sweeping, black moustache. His wound consisted of a broken shoulder and a crease over his left ear. Despite the nurse’s wishes, Zach and Ed crowded into the small room and surrounded the bed. They had brought Peter Armindez as a translator, if he was needed.

They questioned the sergeant on the intent of the Empire’s incursion into their territory and the sergeant answered in Spanish, though they suspected that he spoke English, that they were on their way to meet someone but, he didn’t know whom. The wagons contained presents for those they were meeting.

He asked what they were going to do with him and his men. Pete translated for Ed who said, “We are going to heal you and let you go. Of course, if there is any trouble, we will just shoot you.

“What are the plans of the Empire, in so far as we are concerned?”

Sergeant Ramirez shook his head, “I’m only a lowly sergeant. They don’t tell me anything of importance.”

Ed turned to Zach and said, in English, “Colonel, I don’t trust this man. We need to bring, at least, two thousand men from the east to bolster our border here. Make sure that you include one of the artillery batteries, we can use the 105s. Make room in the bunkers to mount them with the 150s, but keep the smaller artillery mobile.”

Zach saluted smartly, “Shall I alert the troops we have on maneuvers

with the Sioux, sir? That brigade would be useful as a mobile strike force, with the eight tanks and mobile guns.”

Ed had been keeping an eye on the sergeant and saw his eyes go wide at the mention of the soldiers, armor and artillery. Ed continued to play along; worried that Zach was overplaying their hand. Matt interrupted in time to save the charade and called them out into the corridor.

“I sent a courier to hoist a signal to Two Wolves. I figure that we give him a wagon without the weapons or, ah, the, ah, coffee beans,” he said.

The other two laughed, knowing Zach’s love of coffee. The three of them left the hospital in search of William Smith, after asking Pete to stay with the sergeant and try to get more information out of him.

William agreed to give a wagonload of supplies from the Aztec’s to Two Wolves as soon as he contacted them. They would be killing two birds with one stone by showing up Black Moon and building up Two Wolves’ influence.

Zach wanted to dispatch a message to Deseret, telling them of the plan they had interrupted. Jefferson could try and keep an eye out for an invasion, but there was no guarantee that they would be successful. He wanted to send ten breeding pairs of pigeons to the Mormons in order to have a form of communication, no matter how poor. When the Deseret pigeons had produced offspring, then several of the offspring would be sent to Jefferson.

He suggested that Second Rangers resume their scout to the south to make sure that the Aztecs hadn’t sent an army after the pack train. Ed didn’t think this was likely, but concurred with Zach about the scout.

After sending off the messengers and the Rangers, Zach requisitioned a pound of the green coffee beans and spent the rest of the day testing recipes

for roasting times and methods. Sarah found him later sitting on the front porch sipping from a mug, a satisfied look on his face.

The First Rangers returned and reported that there was no sign of an invasion from the east and they had explored as far south as the PaloDuroCanyon in northern Texas. There had been a massacre there. They found a lot of bones, but could only give a rough estimate that over a thousand had been killed, since the bones had been scattered by wild animals. Several of the rangers had tried to count the skulls, but had given up at a around eight hundred.

From the few remaining bits of clothing and ornaments, they were probably Texans fleeing the invasion. A lot of the skulls had gunshot wounds and Jonathon Silver speculated that they had been executed.

Later, Jonathon sought out Ed and passed over a large pouch. “Traded with a Soldier of Christ for some socks and a scarf my step-mom knitted for me.”

Ed grinned, “Thanks, I’ll knit you a scarf, myself. That is, when I learn how. I may share this with Zach, though he swears that he has given up smoking, however much he sucks on that pipe of his.”

Several days later a Sioux appeared and gave the password. Zach, Matt and William met with Two Wolves at the foot of the Mound. He looked drawn and tired. When Zach asked him how things were going, Two Wolves replied that he was having a lot of trouble with Black Moon.

“He is bragging that he will soon have guns and gifts and will lead the young men on raids on which they will gain a lot of loot. I really don’t understand those idiots. I’m not big on farming, but Black Moon has convinced several dozen that raiding, stealing, counting coup is the heritage of

our people.

“I just think they are lazy bastards. They expect the women to do all of the work and admire their muscles, but, I can tell you, the women are getting a little tired of it. Even several of the Moonies’ parents have demanded that they do their part or get out. Enough have been kicked out that they have a camp on the Powder River. A few girls have followed them and are keeping house. The older members of the tribe are fit to be tied, being pretty conservative, but they don’t know what to do.”

Zach observed, “How about something to tie Black Moon to the Aztecs? We have some papers, here,” he handed over the dispatch pouch from the Aztecs and continued, “that propose an alliance with the Aztecs against Deseret.”

Two Wolves read the translated documents through twice. He grinned as he looked up when he had finished. “This is going to raise the roof,” he said. “The Mormons and you are our only friends and here he is proposing an attack on one of you. We don’t have the death penalty in Sioux law, but he could be banished or stripped of his status and declared outlaw.

“We will have to be careful how we pursue this. His followers may just stick by him, regardless.”

“Can’t you challenge him to a fight to the death or something?”

“Matt, that’s not the way it is done. You have watched too many old westerns. The insult would have to be deadly for me to issue a challenge like that and I would just be outlawed. No, short of you shooting him, the only thing to do would be to get him banished and, with these papers, I may just be able to do just that.”

Zach waved his arms towards the Gap and the supply wagon waiting

there started forward. Two Wolves and his men watched with interest as the wagon pulled to a stop near the meeting place. William explained that this was some of the items the Aztecs was sending to Black Moon. “The Council decided to split the stuff with you. Hopefully, it will be a source of embarrassment to Black Moon and discouragement to his followers.”

Two Wolves laughed and years seemed to disappear from his face. He said, “This may cause Black Moon to have a heart attack or die of apoplexy. I’m sure that he was counting on these supplies to arm and inspire his followers to follow him to war. Our Council will be pleased, too.

“Thanks.”

With that, he indicated one of his men to drive the wagon and they set out on their return journey north.

The rest of the spring passed with work, sports contests and routine patrols. Two Troop won the baseball tournament, with Militia A coming in second and BigValley placing third. Hans Silverstein created a wristband of gold, silver or copper for the members of these teams.

“Doc” and Barbara Parker reported that the health of the communities was surprisingly good. The old diseases, which were the leading causes of death, had dropped dramatically. There hadn’t been a heart attack or stroke since “Granny” Campbell died. There were fewer complaints of diabetes, headaches, insomnia and general aches and pains. They believed that this was because of a large reduction of sugar and salt in the diet and increased exercise, due to the rigors of everyday life.

Cosimo Zelazney had started a paper recycling plant. With a lack of bleach, the paper produced was brown and more like papyrus, but it provided a new source of paper for the school. This also freed supplies of scavenged

paper for the infant newspaper that Michael O'Callaghan had started.

He wrote of marriages, births, announcement, recipes and general articles on the happenings in the communities. As Ed observed, "It may be mundane and the writing may not be brilliant, but no one skips an issue."

There were two clashes in early summer. Black Moon and his followers attacked a Mahdist patrol and drove them into a patrol from Jefferson. Soon there was a three-way running fight and two troopers were killed from Four Troop. Black Moon and several of his men were killed and three Mahdists were left on the field. Six Mahdists were captured, one of whom died on the way back to Jefferson. Four of the captives elected to join settlers. The only green turban was executed when the others testified that he was responsible for the rape and murder of several women. The last trooper worried that his family would suffer reprisals and he was set free to return to the Caliphate.

The other clash took place when First Rangers, out on maneuvers on the eastern slope, ran into a hunting party out of New Jerusalem. Apparently, the hunting party saw Don Williams and decided to capture him in order to 'protect' him. Several shots were exchanged and the hunting party called a truce. After an initial period of distrust, began to trade.

The Fundamentalists were eager for bits of jewelry, knitted items and blankets. They said their small flocks had been slaughtered over the bitter winter and there was a shortage of wool and wool products. The Rangers traded for salt, tobacco and the Bowie knives of which the Fundamentalist seemed to have no end.

The Fourth of July was celebrated with an old-fashioned picnic. There were prizes for handicrafts, foot and horse races, shooting contests with

firearms, bows and crossbows, several of the Rangers put on a knife-throwing contest and there was an open-air dance on the town square. The President Jefferson Band played until the wee hours of the morning.

Special contests were held for the unmarried males. The winners claimed a box lunch, prepared by the single females. The names of the cooks were supposed to be secret, but there were signals that let certain males know which lady went with which lunch and, often, contests were ‘thrown’ so a particular man could win.

The Rosaías and Adam Weisenfeld provided jugs of homemade berry and dandelion wine, Lester Shanks and the Churchills had several barrels of beer and Emmerson Johnson distilled fairly good corn liquor and slightly less good potato vodka.

By the end of the evening Sarah knew that Zach would be waking up with an aching head when he started getting maudlin during the dancing. She and Sandy Williams took their husbands home with help from several of the more sober troopers.

Even real coffee took a couple of hours to bring Zach to some semblance of humanity. Cold compresses on the back of his neck and half a dozen eggs did the rest. He looked at Sarah and said in mock anger, “I told you not to let me drink like that. This is your entire fault and I hope you suffer the consequences”

William, now two, piped in, “Is daddy sick, mommy?”

“Yes, dear, your father has acute alcohol poisoning and a bad case of immaturity”

“Keep talking like that,” Zach said, “and my children will have no respect for me. And that will be your fault, too.”

Sarah laughed and took the children to see the Santini's, leaving Zach to his misery. He promptly got up and went to find Ed with whom to commiserate. Ed was at home suffering in silence. After another cup of coffee, laced with Emmerson Corn Liquor and a smoke, Zach asked, "Should we go see 'Doc' for some aspirin?"

"I tried, earlier. He threatened to give me poison to shut me up. You know; his usual bedside manner. What did Emmerson put in that stuff? Now I know why it is referred to as 'pop skull', 'cause that is what my head is doing." Asta, Ed's wife, walked by, obviously unsympathetic.

"You know, the Mahdists or the Fundies or the Aztecs, hell, an undermanned troop of boy scouts, even, could come in here and take over."

Ed replied, "Well, if they do, I hope they kill me."

Several days later, the delegation returned from Monroe. The town meeting was scheduled to be held in two days at the courthouse. The expansion of the council chamber had been completed. Several offices had been built and a balcony had been added. Runners were sent to all of the communities with the news and citizens began arriving the evening before.

The meeting began when William gaveled the meeting to order and asked the delegates to speak. Grady O'Malley stood and spoke first.

"At this time, there is no strong push to reform the United States. The delegates felt that there were too many serious issues that merited immediate attention. Over the next two weeks, we hammered out a treaty of sorts between the State of Washington and the Republic of Columbia.

"Everyone agreed that the Aztecs are the most imminent threat. They suggested that the Mormons and we Jeffersonians watch over the area between the Rockies and the Nevada Desert and the others will protect the

coast.

“We did agree that movement of citizens across boundaries can be done without prejudice, so anyone who wants to resettle to the west can. I would suggest that we don’t test the Mormons’ hospitality too much, however.”

When he sat down, William thanked him and called on Carl to report on the military issue.

“Well, as Grady said, there won’t be much help with troops or weapons, so it looks like we are on our own. We did agree that, if there were a pressing need, we would send troops to support each other. But, there is a larger population along the coast than we have here, so I don’t think we will ever be called on. Plus, it would take several weeks to get anyone from one side to the other.

“We doled out the pigeons as communications, but it will take time to breed the pairs and get them moved around. We will meet at the trading site with the Mormons and they will pass any messages on to us. Same for anything we want to say to the Coast.

William thanked him, too and called on Mitchell to report. There was some grumbling among the audience about the lack of good news and William was forced to gavel for order so that Mitchell could speak.

“On the trade front, there was some progress made. The coast is looking for cattle to mix with their herds to improve them. There will be a demand for llamas, but I’m of the mind that we don’t sell breeding pairs. Keep our monopoly. They were impressed with the quality of our wool and there is a market for it. Other than that, there is some demand for foodstuffs because of the drought. Some esoteric items like arts and crafts could be sold,

but the market is pretty small.

“Truth to tell, all of us are living with a subsistence economy and it would take something big to make anyone rich. If there is any way to measure ‘rich’.”

The meeting broke up after a few desultory questions. The general consensus was that nothing much had been accomplished with the trip except for setting names to faces.

Ed, William and Zach were sitting on the porch of William’s house later that afternoon, enjoying beer from a new batch that the Chruchills had just released. After taking a deep draught from his mug, Zach wiped off the foam and observed, “I’m thinking that we can’t expect a whole lot of help from anyone.”

Ed nodded. William looked held up his mug and looked through the dark, amber liquid. “You are one hundred percent right, Zach. The west coasters are too far away and they have their own problems. The Mormons are willing to trade, but they don’t have a vested interest in saving our butts. The Sioux are pretty chancy allies and, well, there ain’t nobody else.

“As for our enemies,” he continued, “those are legion. Some of the Sioux don’t like us, the Fundamentalists want to ‘lead us down the righteous path’, the Mahdists want to convert or kill us and the Aztecs want to enslave us. Anybody I left out?”

“Old son,” Zach replied, “you forgot about our friends, the New Africans. They don’t want anything to do with our non-black butts and they don’t like you because you are friends with us, Uncle Tom.”

Ed held up his glass in a toast, “Gentlemen, the Jeffersonian motto will henceforth be ‘We are on our own’. We will continue to develop our lands,

train our troops and build our community. So, gentlemen, let's lift our glass and drink to the Independent State of Jefferson. Salud"

With that, they emptied their glasses and observed the setting sun, each locked in their own thoughts.